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# Sexuality

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|---|---|
| Item Type | Preprint |
| Authors | John, Lijo |
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| Download date | 2026-11-08 13:55:07 |
| Link to Item | http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/176208 |

# SEXUALITY - SOCIAL OR BIOLOGICAL?

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Women Studies Department Material

## Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir in his famous book *The Second Sex* quotes *"The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects"*[1], thus arguing that man has always conceived of himself as the essential self, and relegated women to the status of Other, the second sex. In Beauvoir's analysis two factors make the oppression of woman unique: first, unlike the oppression of class or race, the oppression of women is not a contingent historical fact, an event in time that has sometimes been contested or reversed. Second, women have internalised the alien point of view that man is essential and women the inessential. The most controversial statement or rather a statement to be discussed for us in class is *"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"*. It expresses Beauvoir's view of woman's otherness as fabricated, imposed by culture rather than biology. "Women" is thus a cultural sign for the male created product she calls the second sex.[2] Sexuality is thus a social construct mixing sensuality, reproductive life, eroticism and gender role performance, diffused throughout all social and personal life in activities, feelings and attitudes. The social construct and thus the values, behaviours and experiences differ widely over time and across cultures, and they deserve our closest analysis and attention.[3]

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[1] [1] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transalated by H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

[2] Dorothy Kaufmann, "The Second Sex," *Women's Studies Encyclopedia,* Helen Tierney, Vol. Q-Z (Westport: Greenwood Pres, 1999): 1278-79.

[3] "The Second Sex," *Women's Studies Encyclopedia,* Helen Tierney, Vol. Q-Z (Westport: Greenwood Pres, 1999): 1304-1307.

Maithreyi Krishnaraj quotes *"Feminism has not resolved the issue of the female body; is it all constructed by socio cultural practices and ideology, or, is there a female body prior to this construction? Is it all just a "neuter" body, where femaleness is all what society has constructed, or, is there a female body which is given biologically? Insofar as feminism has tried to engage with sex and gender, by trying to move away from a biological essentialism, and in trying to focus on differences between women by caste and ethnicity, it deflected attention away from the female body itself. The feminist viewpoint thereby became unable to speak of the body as a subject".*[4] Sexuality becomes encapsulated within gender rather than explored and seen as a complex third phenomenon of cultural, social and political relations. Economic development connects gender with sexuality in general framework as part of binary understanding of men as one gender, women as another.[5]All the above expressions speak the language of patriarchal domination, caste discrimination and class analysis on sexuality. We focus in the paper on the effects of patriarchal markings on women's body in different areas of sexuality as a social construct, defining beyond sexualities, and issues for discussion.

## Patriarchal Markings

Under patriarchy, a woman experiences the female body, her femaleness in diverse ways: as a desirable "object", as a desired object; as a person with feelings, emotions and cognition, she experiences a fracture. She may be venerated symbolically; she may be denigrated as seductress who prevents a man's advancement. The women's body has to bear so many markers–not only

[4] Maithreyi Krishnaraj, "Women, Embodiment and Personhood," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV/17(April, 2010): 39.

[5] Sonia Correa, "Sexuality, Gender and Empowerment," *Development*, Vol. 53, (June, 2010) 183.

as the desired object of lust, not only as a desirable object of romantic love, but also as the site of honour of family and community.[6]

For patriarchy to stay alive the dialogic relation between the natural and the socio-spatial appears to be transcendent one, where the biological substratum is not denied; rather, the effort is to control and channelize (or transcend) the natural by incorporating it into cultural idioms and practices.[7] *The question arises where does the female subject stand in this altered constructivist account? How does she respond to the socio-spatial and discursive matrix of sexualisation that envelops her? Who or what defines certain acts of love as valid or invalid, in what circumstance are such decisions made and to what purpose?* Keeping these questions in mind, let us discuss patriarchal markings on woman in different lines.

1. Politics of Being and Belonging: Patriarchy constructs bodies along gender lines. From a feminist perspective, human bodies are shaped and controlled by the norms and expectations of the gendered social order in which gendered bodies are produced for a social world creating identities and self-definitions. Marxists located production only in the public sphere, whereas it is the feminists who have highlighted the vital, yet, invisible role of women's bodies in production.[8]

   Specifically, "woman" is defined by what male desire requires for arousal and satisfaction and is socially tautologous with "female sexuality" and "the female sex". In the permissible ways a woman can be treated, the ways that are

[6] Maithreyi Krishnaraj, "Women, Embodiment and Personhood," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV/17(April, 2010): 39.

[7] Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 68.

[8] Meena Gopal Sabala, "Body, Gender and Sexuality: Politics of Being and Belonging," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV/17(April, 2010): 44.

socially considered not violations but appropriate to her nature, one finds the particulars of male sexual interests and requirements. In the concomitant sexual paradigm, the ruling norms of sexual attraction and expression are fused with gender identity formation and affirmation, such that sexuality equals heterosexuality equals the sexuality of (male) dominance and (female) submission.[9]

2. Innu Hennadal – Importance of Puberty[10]: The onset of puberty marks a critical turning point, both in terms of societal perception and on terms of an altered self-orientation to the body.[11] In the whole ritual the girl is made to internalise the idea of shame and honour, surrounding this ritual, thus announcing her maturity. Here their understanding is tied not so much to their own experiences of bodily changes but to the ideas of impurity, which are perhaps echoes of the more widespread cultural perception of the female body as impure, periodically recovering a semblance of purity after each menstrual cycle.[12] Two crucial factors of patriarchal existence in this ritual voice out that the girl is seen as 'polluting' and also that she is ready for marriage and childbearing. It marks the onset of a commodity getting ready for the customers for selection and scrutiny for patriarchy to hold roots.

The patriarchal lines are so perfectly drawn here addressing puberty that the society at large, feels its part of the social and moral order of the things designed for a fruitful future ahead. *The question is who defines purity and pollution? Why it is not attached to men? Why are men not a commodity but*

[9] Anne C. Hermann and Abigail J. Stewart, eds., *Theorizing Feminism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 261.

[10] Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 58.

[11] Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 59

[12] Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001),60.

*fall under customer category always?* It's therefore sexual exploitation in a new form which ventures into the life of every woman, leaving scares of body politics behind.

3. Gendered logic of Mind Body Dualism: In western thought there has been this mind-body dualism in which the female body is considered to represent nature, emotions, the mysterious other, unpredictable and dangerous, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order. The male body represents culture, rationality, the perfect creation, always in charge and ahead. In other words, female body represents all that needs to be tamed and controlled by the male agent who in society could be represented as father, husband, doctor, priest and so on. Other forms of control are of their reproductive capacities by controlling their fertility or infertility, their labour by dictating what tasks are fit for women to do, and by controlling their mobility and freedom by restraining safe access to spaces that men are free to move in thus a mind-body politics.[13] Even today when I reach out to clean my child's potty my mother argumentally says *"leave it their let your wife do what she is designed to work on, you do some men's work"* as though these works doesn't come under my preview as a male. It's all mind-body logic instigated so powerfully in the minds of human beings that for one moment it makes me realise the "being" of all these logics are prevalent only to be dominated on to a weaker sex. *How far do we say we have reached technologically when such logics of demarcation still loom high? In what sense do we call ourselves part of the cyber generation when relationships are still valued on sexual lines not as human beings made and created in the image of God?*

[13] Meena Gopal Sabala, "Body, Gender and Sexuality: Politics of Being and Belonging," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV/17(April, 2010): 46.

4. Marriage – Commodifying Fertility: The attempts to preserve patriarchy lead to the making of the marriage tie sacred for the woman. In a similar vein, emphasis is laid on the control over and protection of woman. In *Manusmrti*, the foundational document of Hindu way of life, the man commands a certain degree of independence and so has to be given a concession to marry more than once, though to preserve the *varna* hierarchy, the first wife has to be of the same varna, and only the subsequent ones can be taken form any of the lower varnas. Any degree of independence accorded to women might have led to polyandry, thereby threatening the fabric of social order based on the family.[14]

   The *kanyadan* ritual is in a marriage based on bride wealth. Male anxiety centring around female sexuality appears to coincide with the need to establish links with other groups, so that kanyadan is a way of dealing with the first and simultaneously effecting the second. Guilt and responsibility gendered by the incest taboo, the drive to perpetuate the species through procreation and the consequent need for women, and the development of patriarchy with its concomitant discourses, all combine to produce the idea of kanyadan. Now kanyadan is dowry in process.[15] *Why is it wealth only from the women's side? Do the women get her real share? Who uses the dowry money? What happens to a poor father unable to give dowry to his daughter for marriage? What is the value of relationships between a husband and wife where money becomes the basic need? Who decides a women's reproductive capacity marking it fertile or infertile?*

[14] Vinita Agrawal, *Women in Manusmrti* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 2006), 57.

[15] Nivedita Menon, ed., *Sexualities* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007), 150.

5. Prostitution- A Question of Violence: First they toyed with the nomenclature of the prostitute. She is now called a 'sex worker' instead of 'prostitute.' This, she has been convinced, will blend her into the mainstream as just another woman worker who is exercising her right to livelihood earned as a 'sex worker.' Now, comes the cry for legalising the profession. Women's organisations throughout the country, and beyond, cry themselves hoarse over liberating the sex worker from a life of humiliation towards one of self esteem. But for whose benefit? When all the seminars are over, when social activists, social organisation, political parties, sociologists, academics have had their say, what emerges is the double edged question about the upliftment of prostitutes – *is the legalisation of their business aimed at protecting them? Or, is it in aid of creating a safety and security net for their clientele-men who define their customers?*[16] Legalising prostitution is, in fact, aimed at safeguarding the health interests of men who regularly visit red light areas in search of cheap sex in view of the AIDS scare that stares them in the face. Then the question - *What about women's safety and health concerns? Or that we have imbibed in our minds that she is selling for rates and so it doesn't matter. Why patriarchal system doesn't ask the question of higher and lower caste while engaging in sex with a sex worker?* In this case even *Devadasi's* are used in the name of religion as prostitutes for upper caste men to indulge in sexual activities. The only difference is that here the *Devadasi's* are not paid any remuneration for their religious services. I was analysing *how an upper caste person who worships the goddess image with all fervour is very willing to exploit women in the name of religion?*[17]

[16] Shoma A. Chatterji, *Women in Black, White and Technicolour* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co, 2004), 227.

[17] Shoma A. Chatterji, *Women in Black, White and Technicolour* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co, 2004), 89-103.

6. Slim and Sexy – In Julie Burchill's Ambition (1991), the career woman's bonkbuster *(a type of popular novel in which there is lot of sex or romantic love),* the narrative impetus comes not so much from the heroine's quest for career advancement as from the humiliation planned for her by the newspaper magnate who desires her. He says, 'I'm sick of breaking bimbos–its no fun, no challenge. Strong, hard, career girls–they are the new filet mignon of females. They're the new frontier. Girls like you. Oh, I'm going to have fun breaking you, Susan.' This is a new version of the Mills and Boon romance, where the powerful man sets about subduing the girl. What is different is the belief that somehow being a successful career woman, being rich and powerful in your own right, means that you can wear the sexual mantle of a masochist without being oppressed by it.[18] In this context the Barbie Doll Syndrome plays a role where the doll sustains and upholds the beauty of face and figure of the female form as the highest aspiration of a girl, reinforcing thereby, the patriarchal stress on these qualities for the female of the human species. With the help of Barbie, starting at an early age, girls receive a message that tells them that their bodies will play a crucial role in their social acceptance in adult life. They create a fantasy life with Ken, the boyfriend and attach value to the prettiest doll equating the concept of happiness for a woman with physical beauty. [19] Women are also posed in the media by the name of *'item girl'* and audience wait to see songs depicting her sexually for giving aspired ratings to the movie. The concept of slim and sexy created crucial markings of power on relationships, value systems and marriage bonding, putting the ordinary people into a false state of fashionable culture in the name of globalisation, development and cyber generation.

[18] Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds., *Feminisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 361.

[19] Shoma A. Chatterji, *Women in Black, White and Technicolour* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co, 2004), 47.

## Caste Markings on Women

'If a woman belonging to the Schedule Caste (SC) /Schedule Tribe (ST), marrying a person belonging to forward caste, is abused in the name of her caste by a member of the public or by her husband/or his relatives, whether an offence under the provisions of Atrocities Act can be registered and investigated against such person?'

In answer to this question, the Bombay High Court recently stated that the caste of a woman born into a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe does not change on her marriage to a person from a forward caste. The court further observed that an SC/ST person suffers from disadvantages and indignities just because he or she is born into a particular caste, which he or she acquires involuntarily on birth. The suffering of such a person is not wiped out by marriage to a person born into a forward caste community and the SC/ST label continues to be attached to such a person, notwithstanding marriage.

"The three-judge bench has upheld and protected both women's right to challenge domestic violence and the right of all SC/ST women to draw on the protection of the Atrocities Act and the Civil Rights Act, the latter right is not usually invoked by SC/ST women and it should be upheld, irrespective of whether the husband is SC/ST or not," points out Ammu Abraham, feminist and Director, Women's Centre in Mumbai, which has dealt with such cases.

Argues Advocate Chandra Nigam, a dalit activist from Delhi, who has dealt with matrimonial disputes for the last eight years, *"This judgment will prove a milestone in dealing with caste violence within families."* Chandra, who has been working with the eminent Bangalore-based dalit activist, Dr Ruth Manorama, and coordinates the North India chapter of the National

Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), observes that there are very few women who file cases against such atrocities and that apart from matrimonial disputes, there are instances of girls facing caste abuse from their husbands and parents-in-laws.

In most of these cases, the wives file cases only under the Domestic Violence Act, Section-498 A under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Section -125 under Criminal Procedure Code (Cr.P.C). Chandra, who is herself in an inter-caste marriage, explains, *"An SC/ST woman married to a forward caste does not get the proper space to express her feelings about caste or caste-related slurs or disputes with her in-laws."*

*"One is born into a caste and this cannot be undone even with the* saat pheras *of* sapt padi *(Hindu marriage),"* reiterates Rakesh Singh, Chandra's husband and Founder Director, *Safar*, Delhi. It is a point that dalit feminist, Anita Bharti, also underlines, *"Caste system is a reality and this judgment is holding the mirror to society."* Bharti is the Secretary of the *Dalit Lekhak Sangh* (Dalit Writers' Association).

Dr Manisha Gupta, founder of *Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal* (MASUM), a Pune-based woman's organization working in the areas of health, domestic violence, and self-employment of rural and tribal people since 1987, agrees with that part of the judgment that states that a woman married into an 'upper' caste, if taunted on the basis on her SC/ST status, can seek redress under the caste atrocities act. But she disagrees with caste, as located within patriarchy, being accepted unquestioningly. *"The fact that caste/religion/nationality isn't allowed to be transferred by the mother to her offspring is in contravention of the provisions in the Convention against Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),"* she says.

Gail Omvedt, human rights activist and B.R. Ambedkar Chair on Social Change and Development at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), puts it this way, *"Dalit women are the dalit of the dalit in Indian society - the thrice oppressed victims of centuries of social, political, economic, cultural and religious pressures."* Adds Prof Omvedt, who has authored numerous books and articles on class, caste and gender issues, *"Historically, marriages are only supposed to take place within the caste and sub-caste; thus what is called* roti-beti vyvahar *(exchange of bread and daughters) is a defining feature of caste. In other words, the greatest sin was inter-caste marriage; and one of the duties of a good king following this doctrine of brahmanism was to enforce the* varnasamkara *(caste system)."* Commenting on the inter linkages between caste and sexuality, Prof Omvedt explains, *"Caste can only survive if women's sexuality is controlled!"*[20]

## Beyond Sexualities

Each time the word 'queer' is used it defines a strategy, an attitude, a reference to other identities and a new self understanding. Both in culture and politics, queer articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality and the family. We are beginning to realise how much our history and ideologies operate on a homo-hetero opposition, constantly privileging the hetero perspective as normative, positing the homo perspective as bad and annihilating the spectrum of sexualities that exist. [21] It all starts with Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code, drafted by Lord Macauley in 1883. The Code reads:

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[20] Kamayani Bali-Mahabal, "Marriage, Women, and Caste: A Signal Verdict," (March 14, 2010) http://www.boloji.com/wfs6/2010/wfs1299.html.

[21] Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds., *Feminisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 362.

*"whosoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years or liable to fine."*

Keeping the above code in mind let us focus on different sexualities and the way they survive.

I. Homosexuality or Gay identities: a father writes with concern about his son who is gay to a Kolkata based queer activist trying to find the meaning of being gay.

*Dear Mr PD,*

*Well I read your articles posted in the group. It is only last year that my son told me what he is. I have no problem with it rather I would like to say to all the papas to be proud that their child is something very special, as they know how to love a man. Love by itself is a wonderful experience in life and when it's between two persons of the same sex it is indeed great.*[22] The letter goes on, the question *how many parents do we get in today's context who talk so openly about their son being a gay? What do the words 'lesbian' and 'gay' really mean? Does this refer to only a sexual relationship with a partner of same sex? Or, does it go far beyond the periphery of pure sensual interaction reaching out to deeply emotional and social responses?* In the context of heterosexuality, gay sexuality was seen as destroying the web created by the patriarchal and caste societies. They were in turn humiliated, beaten and discriminated. Tired of this discrimination, many in the gay community sought even medical help, like reparative therapy, for changing the sexual orientation

[22] Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, eds., *Because I Have Voice* (New Delhi: Yoga Press, 2005), 259.

of patients. Freud's understanding of homosexuality referred to *"certain arrest of sexual development"* which in turn became complicated disease to be cured. Thus came the homosexual liberation movements, organised in India in 1994 (Mumbai) then in Hong Kong with Chinese gay's conference, deciding not to confront mainstream society but to work for the marginalised, discriminated and the medicalisation of homosexuality.[23]

II. Lesbian Sexuality: When the heterosexual relationship as many feminists say designed by social values is being contradicted by a new relation of women with women, it gives rise to patriarchal voices. Literary critic Bonnie Zimmerman puts it *"Generally men see women in relation to themselves as sexual objects or domestic servants. Some [heterosexual women] state proudly that they do not see women at all ("I prefer talking with men"; "sex has nothing to do with my work or life")....Another way heterosexual women see other women, according to patriarchal mythology, is as rivals....Finally a heterosexual women may see other women within the roles and institutions established be a male centred perspective."*[24] This largely means in Chalotte Bunch's phrase *"women-identified-women"* suggesting that a woman is a traitor to male supremacy ands is probably going to be punished by the social order for her impudence in perusing her right not to be *"for men."*[25] Another aspect which is patriarchal in nature in lesbian relationships is the female independence which is quite not valued in a heterosexual male dominated society. Rereading Freud from the perspective of lesbian lives, one sees that everyone's first and most complete love is a woman-the mother. Men get back

[23] Shoma A. Chatterji, *Women in Black, White and Technicolour* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co, 2004), 271.

[24] Anne C. Hermann and Abigail J. Stewart, eds., *Theorizing Feminism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 346.

[25] Anne C. Hermann and Abigail J. Stewart, eds., *Theorizing Feminism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 348.

as adults the kind of lover they had they had to give up as an infant–a woman. But women get *"only a man,"* who calls forth far less of the pleasurable and painful memories of the *"first love"* than wives do for husbands.[26] From the above located situations arise violence's revealed through studies on personal *(physical battering, incarceration, fear, guilt, shame, anxiety, depression leading to suicidal ideation)*, social *(loss of relationships with family and friends, public stigma, censure of social institutions)* and economic *(eviction from home, severance of financial support, loss of jobs)*.[27] What is our response towards a lesbian community in formation?

III. Hijras or Transgenders: Seeing me in this state, my mother asked why are you like this, why are you in the state of collapse. 'This is why we beat you, because we didn't want you to become a hijra. What is the use of being depressed now? Are you now unhappy in this woman's guise?' I said it's not what you think. I want to live the life of a woman. I am what I want to be. I am unhappy because I can't find a descent job or get married. My mother said, marriage for you? With a man? Can you bear a child for him? Your being a hijra is enough humiliation for us. If you get married the little dignity we have will also go.[28] This is a conversation between Revati and her mother. She fought every odd to realise her real identity as a hijra now working in Sangama, Bangalore. For Revati and many more like her the ray of hope came when the government decriminalized same sex, rubbing off the existing Section 377(on July 2, 2009), from where we started our discussion. The question: *Is that all what*

[26] Anne C. Hermann and Abigail J. Stewart, eds., *Theorizing Feminism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 349.

[27] Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, eds., *Because I Have Voice* (New Delhi: Yoga Press, 2005), 163.

[28] Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, eds., *Because I Have Voice* (New Delhi: Yoga Press, 2005), 230.

*they dream for, What about the stigma attached when we still close the glasses of our car windows?*

## Conclusion

The markings are a social construct referring to all the above discussions in these areas. Patriarchy to stay alive it has put boundaries to even the other sexualities. What should be our challenge: Is it only a paper presentation like mine or more action oriented approach, more opening the glasses of our windows to see these communities in a new light, or may be a silent spectator. The decision is ours. It's appreciable for these communities that they took a step forward to join those people standing outside the patriarchal set up and fighting for their rights. May God bless their endeavour.

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