

Sexual Agency and the Melancholic Cultural Body

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Since the widely reported 2012 Delhi gang-rape and murder case, world media coverage drew attention to misogyny in India, signalling an association between women's sexual oppression and India. Unlike Anglo-Saxon, European and South American countries, Indian women as sexual agents remain a lacuna in the international imagination: when it comes to sexuality, where curiosity should be, there is international sympathy for their fight against oppression.

Unilateral sympathy, we know from psychoanalysis, can be a form of projection that denies the agency of the subject. While it is true that traditional Indian society has been founded on the sexual control of women, the rise of India in the popular imagination as rape-central has a suspicious undercurrent to it. The motif of Indian men as badly behaved and violent, and Indian women in need of protection from them, remembers and repeats the image of the savage native man that took shape under colonialism. There has undeniably been a trauma to Indian women from their participation in a social structure founded on the control of women's sexuality. Yet, the tendency to over-sympathize with the trauma of misogyny pushes the pleasures of women's sexual agency under misogyny into the unconscious.

Models for women's sexual agency are often culturally monolithic: there is a tendency to equate sexual agency with what psychoanalytic writer Jacqueline Rose calls the 'Internet model of global feminism' represented by 'a liberated Western woman in her pumps and smart skirt, toting a laptop en route to the airport' (Rose, 2004, pp. 33-36). This woman is clearly recognizable as a sexual subject, but she excludes forms of sexual subjectivity that are less individualist and capitalist than hers. Similarly when it comes to cultural forces that oppress sexuality, the widely recognized empirical research of Baumeister and Twenge (2002) suggest that the fact of having had a 'sexual revolution' – as was the case in Europe and North America – is *the* mediating factor in the near-universal cultural suppression of female sexuality. Their meta-analysis of cross-cultural studies overwhelmingly show that if a country has a sexual revolution, then women acknowledge wanting more sex (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002, pp. 166-203).

By recognizing post-sexual revolution values as being better for women, this finding feeds into the popularly-held idea that women in the western world have a comparative advantage in matters sexual, instead of simply a difference. This comparative advantage seems related to the researchers providing more recognition to the varietal of sexual subjectivity in which there is an open individual acknowledgement of desire.

What vocabulary might we use to talk about the sexual agency of women who live and enjoy affectionate relationships within group networks that pride themselves on women's sexual control? How do women in countries that have controlled women's sexuality mourn misogyny while continuing to have Eros? A linear model of bodily autonomy contradicts the adhesive nature of the group in the inner world of Indians (Kakar, 1996), and their preference for configurations that favour group harmony and inclusion over individual enactments of assertion (Sinha, Sinha, Verma & Sinha, 2001, p. 133-145). Individual and group forms of Eros both live in the body and are often inseparable. Writing on the embodied nature of community life for Indians, psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar writes:

'Individual and group self are birthed simultaneously for Indians, a "We are" simultaneous to an "I am"' (Kakar, 1996, p. 361). The physical Eros for community life is cemented by intensely physical early childhood relationship, in many cases characterized by intimate contact such as long-term breastfeeding, and oral contact such as feeding via the hands. Thus, while the sexual oppression of misogyny must be rooted out, it is packed with layers of affiliative meaning and relationship; links to the previous generation; to valued collective cultural memories and to culturally meaningful sexual and aesthetic positions that are not easily guillotined.

As a woman practicing psychoanalysis with women* in India, I find it useful to think of an individual body having erotic drives that arise autonomously, as well as having inter-generationally transmitted drives, equally erotic, that owe their origin to the group rather than to the individual. (**While I use the word 'woman', I must say here that women who come to me for psychoanalysis are all urban, upper-middle and middle-class*). The heavy cultural body contained in the individual one holds the history of the Indian community's drives for the sexual control of women; the group's idealisation of female chastity and motherliness exercises a bodily perceptible effect upon the individual imagination. The light cultural body, the memory of affectionate bonds with family members who nurtured these ideals, along with identifications with global modernity, keep the heavy cultural body out of awareness and often unconscious.

What happens when a much-wanted individual sexual liberation develops alongside generational and group identifications that idealize denied sexual agency for women? Listen to a case of a 26-year old patient, Shibani, who presented with great distress after having had a pleasurable experience of casual sex that she initiated. Following the experience, she found herself making demands upon the man to consider marrying her. Her demands performed an interest in him as a future partner that far outweighed her actual interest in him. On many occasions she described him as boring, patriarchal, and without much to offer except 'stability and security that I don't need because I have plenty of my own money'. Yet, she was outraged when he agreed with her. She asserted over and over again less that she wanted to have him back, and more that she did not want him to think she was 'that type of girl'. When I press her for what 'type of girl' she is referring to, she eventually says 'the kind who would have a one night stand'. Then she realises the hilarity of this and turns around to look at me. We share a moment of truthful uproarious laughter at the irony of her having to prove she was not the type of girl she clearly was.

My interpretation was that Shibani's performance, directed towards the man she had slept with, was actually for another audience: her traditional Punjabi family, for whom an individual woman's sexuality was a group symbol representing community honour. The demands that he consider marriage were not directed by the Eros of individual love but by the Eros of community aggression towards individual women's sexual agency. Both forms of Eros lived in Shibani's body. When she enjoyed casual sex she was identified with her individual body; soon after, she would identify with her community body, which seemed affectively activated post-coitus. She would feel filled with an urgent desire to make her bed partner her life partner and would compose elaborate fantasies – which she would enact in real life – involving attempts to link him to her, including contacting his family members, offering them gifts, and complaining to them about his treatment of her. Her actual individual feelings about marrying him were put aside in the interest of honour, *as her family might have once done*.

An anachronistic regression to the sexual values of previous generation is experienced in the body as a pressing need, much like a sexual one, but with the eroticized aggression characteristic of misogyny. The experience of the community body affects the therapist in the transference in numerous ways. She may experience the disowned pleasurable feelings of the individual exercising

sexual agency, she may identify directly with the punitive community, or she may feel – as I did – a confusing shifting sympathy that remembers and repeats her own helplessness in situations of community control of women's sexuality. When Shibani spoke of her abandonment, shame, and guilt after having had a casual sexual experience, I felt deeply moved for how helpless she seemed. Yet, when she spoke about how she stalked the man to demand that he introduce her to his family, I found myself in a reverie about being stalked in my teens by a man who was not visually threatening but whose uncontrollable behaviour I was told to 'just ignore'. As Shibani continued to speak I felt an odd admiration for the aggressive pleasure she was experiencing in her pursuit, then a tremulous anxiety about the intrusions she was making into the man's life, and eventually a compassion for the man she was stalking. I was not, I felt, in the presence of the abandoned young woman who began the narrative, but her enraged father or brother who may have once enacted such a form of justice upon her would-be lover. What was especially notable was the vocal register in which she spoke, that carried no affection, heartbreak or longing. It was a mixture of violent aggression ('He better not treat me like this') and practical rational agency ('He's got a family business, I think I would be fine with marrying him, I'd be well-taken care of...'). The reality of Shibani's own financially successful professional life disappeared into the backdrop as she undertook an arranged-marriage-style evaluation of her meat-market purchase.

What made Shibani routinely anxious after casual sex, was not the absence of the sexual partner – rarely important to her – but her own self-image within the internalized community of her sexually conservative extended family. While her individual body took great pleasure in her sexual experience, the drag of the cultural body – whose loss remained unmourned – morphed into acts of misogynistic mimicry that defended against the loss threatened by her exercise of sexual agency. When she was unable to enact an eroticized sacralized aggression – what I am calling misogynistic mimicry – Shibani would experience the misogyny internally, as debilitating symptoms of sleeplessness and depression, punishment for sexual agency, narrated in a melancholic vocal register.

Psychoanalysis tells us that misogyny is the product of a failed mourning for the lost Eros of early life. Enrobed in the cultural body is the maternal one that it protects. The misogynistic enactment of rape is indeed a protest against the rising agency of women, but its reportage often unconsciously works to repeat the motif of the vengeful community body that asserts male dominance. If the reporting emphasis was on women's experience of how they manage sexuality while remembering and working through a collective history of sexual control, then paradoxically, as in Shibani's case, women's participation in unusual misogynistic enactments including self-directed ones, do not rule out sexual agency, they sponsor it. On the analyst's couch, the complexity of mourning misogyny coexists with the exercise of sexual agency: women in India are in the middle of the sexual ethos of several generations at once, depending on the individual, community and parental figures that arise in their imaginings.

References

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361.

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