



SOCIOLOGUE

THEME - WOMEN AND DESIRE;
CELEBRATING FEMALE SEXUALITY

आओ बात करें

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Department

Updates

- Film Screening: Shahid on 4th September, 2018
- Book Discussion on Mothering A Muslim by the author Nazia Erum on 14th September, 2018
- Film Screening: Sputnik Moments and guest lecture by Mrs. Barbara Wackernagel on 26th September, 2018
- Workshop on Character and Nation Building conducted by Mr. Raghu Hari Dalmia on 1st October, 2018
- Department field trip to Murthal on 12th October, 2018
- Department field trip to Khajuraho and Orchha from 16th to 20th October, 2018
- Film Screening: Khujli and talk by Ms. Aparna Bhatt on 23rd J January, 2018

From the Editor's Desk

Desire, the word has multifarious meanings. If we go by the actual meaning of desire, it simply means to crave or want; but how often do we associate the word desire with its actual meaning and not connote it with something sexual? However, the connotation is not completely wrong. One of the understandings of sexuality is that it is a mode of expression of our desires. Desire comes naturally to all but is criticised at different levels- sex as a topic of conversation is considered a taboo and secondly, even when it is talked about, it's mostly in the context of a heteronormative male, whereas the desires of other genders are considered unnatural. As unjust as it may sound, in a patriarchal society like ours where the men are considered to be the breadwinners and the women child bearers, the power dynamic comes into play. In the arena of sexuality, women meet with a similar fate. Sexual desire has always been standardized as a male prerogative and as such has become the norm where 'sexuality' means only a male's sexuality. Why is it so? There is the marginalization of women where they are considered to be 'naturally' weaker and incompetent than the men. Controlling their sexuality has been an important tool to maintain power over them thereby reproducing the status quo.

It is in this scenario that a woman becomes an object of sex to satisfy the desire of a man's sexual needs rather than being a desiring subject. We all have seen Katrina Kaif enjoying a mango juice with each drop of that juice dripping on her lip one at a time. Here the actress is not used only to sell that product but also used as a fantasy for many to imagine themselves as 'sexy'. It creates an image of a girl drinking juice who is not only satisfying herself from the summer heat but also can 'turn a man on'. Had this advertisement been done by any male actor like Shah Rukh Khan, the product, in this case, juice, would have represented a healthy product to quench thirst.

Words like 'sexy', 'sex' is always seen from the gaze of a man. Images of girls washing a car, (seductively) pouring water on her body are different ways of how sexuality is represented by a male gaze. When movies like *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, *Lust Stories* are introduced or screened, they are banned or considered uncultured. This is because of the taboo that society has placed on the expression of 'sex' and 'sexuality' in general and more prominently in the case of women. Sexual desire amongst women as a topic has received less attention, which suppresses a very vital aspect of their womanhood. This objectification of women and the suppression of their desires in public discourse as normal leaves us all puzzled. Women are not supposed to express their desires and when they do express, it is misinterpreted as breaking the norm and they get categorised as loose and "uncultured".

What we see here is an understanding of our social world in binaries of good and bad, right and wrong, ugly and pretty, man and woman, mind and body, etc - a result of the enlightenment project. The Cartesian dualism of the mind-body is a good point, to begin with. The post-enlightenment and pro-rationality era saw human existence as evaluated by the existence of the mind (intellect and reason) while the body (experience and emotion) becomes peripheral. The marginalisation of experience of the body and emotions led to the sidelining of sexual feelings and desires particularly in the case of women due to the patriarchal ideology. This gets translated into a normative tradition of what is 'acceptable' and what is 'unacceptable'. What a man desires is acceptable and a woman's desire is unacceptable and it is perceived as obscene/vulgar. The man-woman binary then gets reproduced within the larger power structure as the subject-object dichotomy.

There is a need to have a renewed discourse on such a social construction of sexuality and sexual behaviour. To engage more with this issue from a sociological perspective, the Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College attempts to bring forth the voices of these women in the frontline. The department has been engaging with various issues encompassed within the larger themes of "voices from the margins" questioning and critiquing mainstream perspectives and discourses to renew our understanding by bringing forth the voices that have been muted, ignored and suppressed for long. This year at the department we intend to raise a few questions which have found few takers even in the academic circles--- what does it mean to have a sexual desire when you are a woman? How do women deal with societal pressures while dealing with their sexual desires? Has there been a change in the way women of the younger generation respond to these dilemmas? How did this change come about?

A woman's journey to freedom requires her to be comfortable with her own sexual desire. Sexual liberation leads to self-exploration and eventually in finding our true selves. As Foucault once said, "Discourse on sexuality, seen as a revolt against a repressive system, becomes a matter of political liberation rather than intellectual analysis". With the same idea in mind, we endeavour to celebrate female sexuality, to break away from our fetters and engage in a dialogue about our experience of becoming the women we truly are.

जीवन केवल एक अनुभव है, ना कुछ उससे अधिक और ना कुछ उससे कम.. उसी अनुभव की बात करना चाहते हैं हम.. आओ बात करें!

Mehar Bhandari and Shubhangee Mishra

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Pornography: Some Reflections

Anahita Tenzing Sharma

“Pornography is vital to freedom and a free and civilized society should be judged by its willingness to accept it.” - Salman Rushdie.

“The erotic is life-affirming, pornography is life-negating.” – Jug Suraiya

These two statements represent two polar perspectives on pornography which has been at the centre of many debates. The debate is particularly relevant today in the light of the pornography ban in India and the ban of ‘adult content’ on Tumblr.

Those against pornography describe it as the most literal embodiment of the male gaze; almost every scene is intended for men and is based on the explicit sexualization and degradation of the women involved.

Men in porn, though literally engaged in sex, aren’t sexualized the way the women are. Even lesbian porn is created for men and is not intended to capture the essence of lesbian sexuality or catering to it. It’s about lesbian women, but it’s not created for or by them.

Anti-porn feminists have complained that pornography, by objectifying women, reduces them to sex objects whose core value is to satisfy the male libido. Many of them argue that all pornography is demeaning to women or that it contributes to violence against women. The production of pornography, they argue, entails the coercion, abuse, and exploitation of the women who perform in it. In terms of its consumption, they charge that pornography eroticizes the domination, humiliation, and coercion of women, and reinforces sexual and cultural attitudes that are complicit in rape and sexual harassment. It also presents a severely distorted image of sexual relations and reinforces sex myths. It is often accused of being a degraded, unrealistic and hyper sexualised version of human sexuality.

Those who are pro-porn view porn as a universally enjoyable and empowering method of exploring one’s sexuality. Some feminists embrace it as a medium of female self-expression. As more women have entered the production side of the industry, this has allowed them to gear porn more towards women. Feminist porn, an offshoot of pornography, is interested in challenging representations of men and women, as well as providing sexually-empowering imagery that features many kinds of bodies. Salman Rushdie even called pornography a ‘standard-bearer for freedom and civilization’.

An important point that is often overlooked when claims are made about women being forced or coerced to be a part of the industry, is the blatant ignorance of the possibility of them doing so on their own volition. Such claims not only rob performers of control over their own bodies, but they also belittle and shame them for choosing these occupations. Critics seem to undermine the fact that the adult entertainment industry provides legitimate sources of income to all the people involved, and that it is also a space for the performers to explore their sexuality as well.

The issue of consent is relevant here. We need to rethink it. Most of the discourse on consent is structured around respecting ‘no’. Writer Richa Kaul Padte’s take on consent is different, in fact, refreshing and worth a thought. She reframes consent as “... something that leads to pleasure rather than something that staves off rape...” To her, the narrative around the upbringing of women is usually structured around good touch and bad touch. She is taught that certain parts of her body are off limits “...we believe that the only time our sexual agency matters is in our ability to say ‘no’. But we should also feel empowered to say ‘yes’ to also act from a place of desire and not just one of fear...” To first acknowledge your desire and need for sexual pleasure and then fearlessly seek it and give consent for it whether through watching porn or any other way is what needs to be accepted and normalized.

Rather than censoring or putting a blanket ban on all things that are considered sexually explicit, or judging them as immoral and associating them with all that is decadent and evil, we need to critically reflect on the preconceived notions we have about them. Pornography can act as a powerful tool in the exploration of female desire. As Richa Kaul Padte says, “We don’t need to take porn away from women to help them, we just need to make porn better”.



Making love with myself was like dusting off a layer of dislike, revealing authenticity, inner beauty and potential.” August McLaughlin

Picture Credits: tinybudhha.com

Prurient Pleasures

Ms. Richa Chilana

Assistant Professor

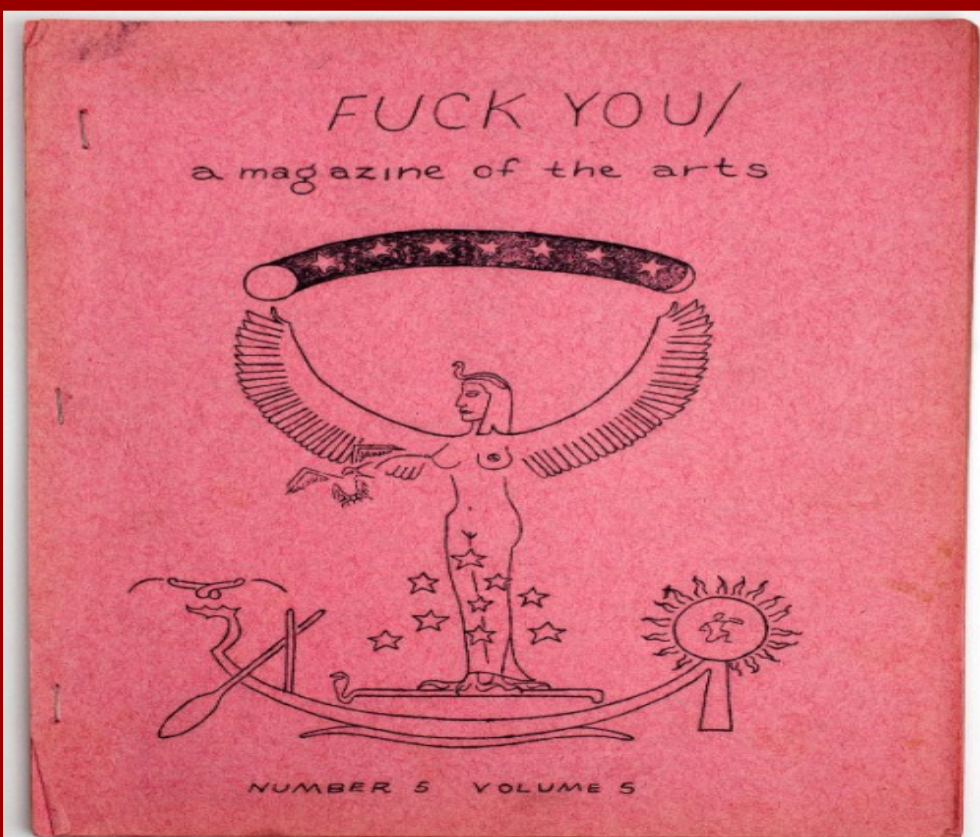
Department of English

In an interview in 2002 when Jacques Derrida was asked if he would be interested in watching a documentary about the lives of philosophers like Heidegger, Kant or Hegel, he said that he would be interested in “Their sex lives because it is not something they talk about.” Literature that grapples with various facets of the body and its sexual experiences enjoys phenomenal popularity. It not only transforms our understanding of that experience but our approach to literature itself. Censorship has not completely precluded the discourse about the body and its myriad pleasures and pains. Literature in which “sexuality and/or sexual desire has a dominant presence” is considered erotic literature (*Encyclopedia of Erotica*). It is often confused with pornography and romance that has sexually explicit passages.

Erotic literature also makes us engage with the culturally and historically relative nature of the concept of obscenity. While the law in Britain defines obscenity as “anything that may deprave or corrupt persons who are likely to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it”, French law’s concern with “bonnes moeurs” (public decency) is equally ambiguous and vague. Susan Sontag, by referring to the French tradition represented by Sade and others, argues how for them, what is considered obscene, is “primal notion of human consciousness, something much more profound than the backwash of a sick society’s aversion to the body.” As against those for whom reading and writing erotica is a sickness or perversion, for Sontag, the abject refusal or shame to talk of the body is symbolic of the diseased nature of society. In his memoir, *Something Like an Autobiography* (1981), Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa writes about the censors who found a line in one of his scripts obscene. According to him, “For these people suffering from sexual manias, anything and everything made them feel carnal desire. Because they were obscene themselves, everything seen through their obscene eyes naturally became obscene. Nothing more or less than a case of sexual pathology.” Therefore, does sexual repression result in outwardly denouncing “obscenity” and secretly consuming pornography.

Despite the focus on the sexuality of twentieth-century thinkers and philosophers like Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault, the reading and writing of erotic literature are perceived as a frivolous and perverted pleasure. In addition to obscenity, erotic literature is also accused of catering to the sexual fantasies of a largely male readership by degrading, eroticizing and fetishizing women. For Robin Morgan, “Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice”, while Susan Brownmiller upheld this conflation of fantasy and praxis by founding Women Against Pornography. Andrea Dworkin denounced the whittling down of the way in which sex can be discussed or shown by gesturing towards the undue focus in art on what the man does; the woman is just acted upon, a recipient of the sexual prowess of the man. It is the absence of degrading depictions of women that differentiates erotica from pornography, thus, making it pro-female according to Gloria Steinem. The sizeable female readership of erotica indicates how this genre does not always reinforce but often undermines conventional thinking and gender stereotypes.

Ismat Chughtai and Krishna Sobti were some of the first few writers from India, who created vocal and desiring protagonists who used a body-centric vocabulary to articulate their aspirations. They were often accused of being excessively preoccupied with sex because of stories like “*Lihaaf*” and *Mitro Marjani* but as Chughtai says in “*In the Name of Those Married Women*”... “Purdah had already been imposed on me, but my tongue was an unsheathed sword. No one could restrain it...” The focus on the female body and the manner in which it is constrained was their vociferous attack on the hypocritical codes of the society that feared the visibility of the female body.



*Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts was a literary magazine founded in 1962 by the poet Ed Sanders on the Lower East Side of New York City.



*Suck Magazine Issue No. 1 (Sept. 1969) published in London; succeeding issues, nos. 2-8, published in Amsterdam by Joy Publications, March 1970-June 1974.

Women and Desire in Cinema

Arishya Sharma and Priya Bhatt

Cinema is a solid medium meant not just for entertainment but it also reflects and creates reality. Despite the innumerable possibilities to showcase varied experiences, most depictions of sex and sexuality in film and television are presented from the male gaze and represent women as hyper-sexualized objects meant solely for men's pleasure. Female protagonists are often depicted as objects of desire: sexy, playful, coy, flirty and decidedly feminine. Many a time they are arm candy or props to the narratives of men. The spectrum of female archetypes available for the women of the Indian film industry is painfully limited often moving between the two extremes of the heroine and the vamp. Thus, in the early 1970s and 1980s, cinema projected heroines as subtle and sober characters while vamp were the ones who expressed their desires openly and their (sexual) advances were often shunned by the heroes who would be seen running after the heroines. Any exploration beyond this realm was/is deemed an 'art film' or the character is treated as an outlier often a comic relief or the very obvious object of non-desire from the men.

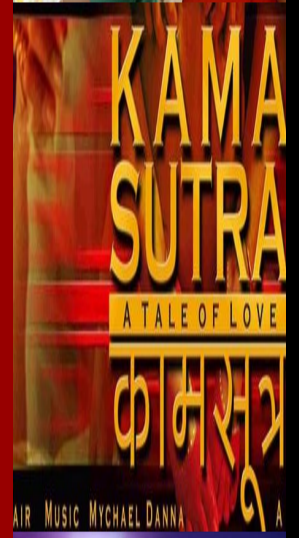
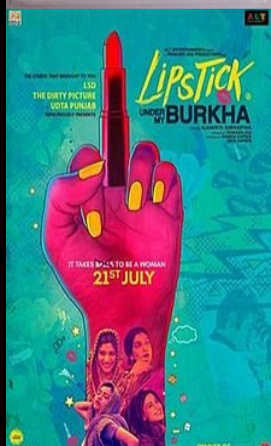
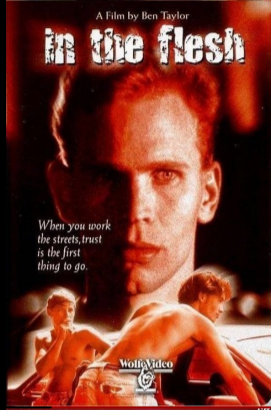
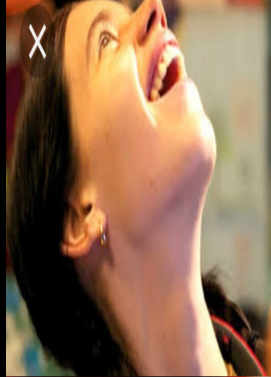
In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, cinema in India witnessed a fresh perspective wherein the leading heroines as well like Zeenat Aman, Parveen Bobby and Neetu Singh transcended the boundaries and started expressing their sexuality openly. This, however, did not make a much of a dent in the way sexual desires of women were portrayed on screen and received by the audience - a situation that continues till date. Like in the movie, **Aitaraaz (2004)** released in the year 2004, portrayal of Priyanka Chopra's character is a reminder of how cinema is still stuck in the trope of the binary - heroine vs. vamp where if a woman is shown to have desires (in this case, her sexual advances towards the character played by Akshay Kumar) then it is exaggerated and is portrayed as being fulfilled through exploitative behaviour for which she needs to be punished by the ideal wife, played by the actress Kareena Kapoor.

However, with changes in the discourse on sexuality world over, there have been changes in the Indian cinema as well. Female sexuality isn't in the closet any more. If one looks at the spate of films that have been released in the past couple of years, they show that women mouth expletives, watch porn and don't mind talking about their orgasms—acts that were taken for granted when it comes to men. The new age cinema is the one that can be seen as accommodating the representation of sexual desires of a woman as normal everyday behaviour, although the exhibition of their emotions and desires has received mixed responses. On the one hand, it is considered a taboo, hence censored/banned while on the other, it is being celebrated in its true spirit. Thus, films that have tried to collapse the strict boundary between acceptable and unacceptable, break away from the stereotype of the 'ideal moral heroine' and have dared to explore the subject of female sexuality and independence in a serious, non-conventional manner have been caught in the crossfire of sorts. For instance, films like **Veere Di Wedding (2018)** where the actress Swara Bhaskar has been shown masturbating or **Lust stories (2018)** and **Lipstick Under My Burkha (2017)** which have shown how women take control of their desire and put several forms of it on display have been severely criticised.

However, despite criticisms, these films carry the narrative voice of the women and have attempted to normalize the conversation about a woman's sexual agency, created a space for discussing it with ease and have argued that women's desire is not only valid but needs to be discussed and represented. This freedom has empowered her not to become an object of pleasure but to have the equal right to seek pleasure. As rightly quoted by Anita Udeep director of the movie **90ML (2019)** "Why can't women express lust, are they trees?"

Cinema can contribute significantly to bringing about this major change in the mindset of society, as what we see is what we believe and what we believe is what we see. The society has from time immemorial been so relentless in its repression of female sexuality that it is high time it should be celebrated rather than shunned. The message is loud and clear if we as women are ourselves uncomfortable with our sexuality how can we expect others to be vocal about it. Hence we should be conscious of our desires and it is time that we tell our own stories.

"...A woman can be as sensual as she is spiritual, as erotic as she is intellectual and as climatic as she is emotional."



In Dialogue with Anita Udeep



Certified 'A', **90ML** is a movie about a bunch of women who share their life stories and problems over alcohol and even ganja.

It has attracted criticism from many – including those from the largely misogynistic and male-dominated film industry – for portraying women indulging in such activities, which they feel is unsuited to "Tamil Culture".

In an interview with *The_News_Minute* Anita Udeep, the director of **90ML** said,

“Society has accepted all kinds of men – good ones, men with grey shades, bad ones. But women are either slotted into being a goddess who sacrifices everything – a '*kudumba kuthuvilakua*' or a slut if she does what she wants in life.

The things I've shown in this film, like a wife expecting affection from a husband, are very common. Why can't a woman express lust? Is she a tree? All of us have these feelings.

Making this film itself has been liberating for me. It has made me give importance to myself, my needs and desires. Women's empowerment has to begin with self-empowerment.”

*Picture Credits : silverscreen.in

*Interview Credits : thenewsminute.com
(4th March 2019)

RECOMMENDATIONS

MOVIES

- India Cabaret (1985)
- Fire (1996)
- In the Flesh (2002)
- Water (2005)
- Margarita with a Straw (2014)
- Angry Indian Goddesses (2015)
- Masaan (2015)
- Parched (2015)
- Pink (2016)
- Memories of a Machine (2016)
- Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016)
- Anaarkali of Aarah (2017)

SHORT FILMS AND SERIES

- It's Not That Simple: Season 1 (2016)
- Khaney Mein Kya Hai? (2017)
- Khujli (2018)
- Lust Stories (2018)

BOOKS

- Men must work and women as Well by D.H. Lawrence
- The Laugh of Medusa by Hélène Cixous
- The Veiled Woman by Anaïs Nin
- A Clear and Present Difference by Gloria Steinem
- Parrots of Desire edited by Amrit Narayan
- Panty by Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay
- Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows by Balli Kaur Jaiswal
- A Handbook for My Lover by Rosalyn D'Mello
- Sita's Curse : The Language of Desire by Sreemoyee Piu Kundu
- A Pleasant Kind of Heavy and Other Erotic Stories by Aranyani

EDITOR'S CHOICE

And Still I Rise

Maya Angelou

You may write me down
in history
With your bitter, twisted
lies,
You may trod me in the
very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset
you?
Why are you beset with
gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got
oil wells
Pumping in my living
room.

Just like moons and like
suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing
high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered
eyes?
Shoulders falling down like
teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful
cries?

Does my haughtiness offend
you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got
gold mines
Diggin' in my own back-
yard.

You may shoot me with your
words,
You may cut me with your
eyes,
You may kill me with your
hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got dia-
monds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's
shame
I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in
pain

I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and
wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in
the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror
and fear

I rise
Into a daybreak that's won-
drously clear

I rise
Bringing the gifts that my an-
cestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of
the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise

*Picture Credits: "Le Rêve" by Picasso

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