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Reconstructing Sexual Relations

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The Western Heritage

A crucial contributing factor to the Western development of the women's movement in the west has been what has sometimes been termed as the "sexual revolution" of the post-war period, i.e. acceptance of pre-marital sex and change of sex partners as a fairly normal part of life.

As is well-known, in most countries of Europe and in the U.S., a major catalyzing factor for the women's movement has been the struggle for a liberal abortion law and this struggle, which has been carried on since the sixties, is by no means won. Abortion as a basic right had become crucial in societies where pre-marital sex was increasingly accepted. At the same time, the State and religious institutions (especially the Catholic Church) were trying to protect and uphold the institution of the family and to boost declining population figures by making abortion inaccessible, with hair-raising results. The estimates of illegal and often highly hazardous abortions were equaling the numbers of births in many countries.

This made struggle, on the issue of health, an obvious need. Women found themselves in the clutches of the judiciary, the medical profession and religious institutions, all ganging up together against women, trying to autonomously control their sexuality and fertility. It was obvious that access to contraceptives and to safe legal abortion was a key issue and demystifying the medical profession became more of an imperative, since the medical institutions were so obviously intertwined with the state apparatus and with religious lobbies.

What was overlooked during the late sixties was the fact that the constellation was characteristic of the capitalist consumer-society in which "having sex" was in with "having so many other things", and only from the early seventies did

women become fully aware that the so-called sexual revolution had been a very patriarchal event in a number of ways. Women who had been eagerly using hormonal oral contraceptives as soon as they became available, slowly discovered that they had been taken for a ride by men and by drug companies and then the search for less harmful alternatives and the impetus of the health movement grew. A book like Germaine Greer's: "Sex and Destiny", is a clear example of this whole development. Greer inquires in detail into traditional and non-invasive forms of fertility control and also shows interest in sexual practices which are less likely to lead to pregnancy.

In India, discussion on sexuality hardly takes place. If at all, it is mostly part of the discussion on obscenity, media policy or rape. A male friend recently confessed to me that up to the age of thirty he had not been able to really understand what rape was because, seeing the compulsory rape scene in any Indian movie he presumed that what was concealed behind dramatic music and thunderstorms/downpours was simply "having sex". A female student in a renowned women's college said that the teacher, who on the insistence of the students had been entrusted with telling them the "facts of life" had started off with saying that sex is sin and that's why it takes place at night. Consumerist movie culture hints at this kind of "sinful" sex, i.e. implying denigration of women in an alluring way all the time and therefore anti-obscenity campaigns are an obvious activity of many women's groups. However, since such campaigns often appeal to Victorian or indigenous feudal values which depict women as sexless, they also reinforce narrow moralism and do not actually facilitate an open, debate on sexuality.

At the same time, the debate on contraceptives has nearly left out sexuality as a topic. A number of friends in different groups of the women's movement have remarked that they feel "Our Bodies Ourselves" of the Boston Health Collective to be very obsessed with the intricacies of sexual intercourse and with body consciousness in general. My impression is that this observation has to do with very real cultural differences in attitudes towards sexuality and fertility.

Ideological Assumptions

Some of the prevalent ideological assumptions about sexuality have already been mentioned. Sex is "dirty" and therefore taboo. Sex is also considered such an important drive that any man and woman being left alone with one another are invariably expected to end tip in sexual intercourse. Men are born sexual beings, women are born for motherhood. This dichotomy is expressed in cultural values

which go back to ancient literature. e.g. in Tamil, a man is supposed to have such qualities like "vikram" (Braveness, virility) and aanmai (manliness). A woman is meant to have thaymai (motherliness) and karpu (chastity). While the "masculine" values comprise sexual potency, the "feminine" values deny and control sexuality. Per definition, a woman's physical existence does not underly her own control. She is meant to pour her love out to her children and to concentrate all her physical desire on marriage and husband.

Even in this relationship, the point is not her well-being but invariably his. The good wife remains the one who, according to folk-lore, carries her, bed-ridden husband to the brothel house since he so desires or, as a variation, behaves, herself, like a prostitute in bed if he so desires. The common denominator is denial of a woman's subjectivity, self-respect and self-determination. Invariably therefore, the other side of the coin of the chaste housewife is the prostitute, the myth that a woman's sex-drive is insatiable if she is not kept under control and the idea that any woman who develops her won skills, talents and decision-making will end up prostitution.

In fact, so powerful is the myth of prostitution that E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker of the DK Movement devoted a whole chapter to it in his book, "Pen yen adimal anal" (Why are Women enslaved) under the headline "On prostitution", - without ever mentioning the actually existing institution of prostitution. The dichotomy between the chaste housewife and the "prostitute" seems to be all-pervading and it seems to be an overwhelming difficulty to transcend this dichotomy. In the "Silapattiharam", the national Epic of Tamil Nadu, the chaste wife is Kannagi who can set flames to Madurai by the power of her chastity (i.e. loyalty to her husband Kovalam) while the other heroine is Malathi, the dancing girl, whose morality is redeemed by ascribing to her the same loyalty to Kovalam as to Kannagi. When Kovalam leaves her, she becomes a Buddhist nun. Periyar resolves the dichotomy by denigrating the family and encouraging women to go on a child-bearing strike. Present day anti-obscenity campaigns often take recourse to the traditional sentiment of "kappu", "sumangali" etc. in order to "rescue women's honor".

Gandhian ideology has contributed a lot to encourage women's autonomy. It encourages women to refuse being sexually used, it denounces men's "lust" and tendency towards violence, all these in the face of a rising tide of pornography and assault. Gandhi also saw women as pillars of strength, capable of resisting rape, to determine their own lives and to make a contribution to national development. But he did all this at the cost of not acknowledging sexuality in any positive sense. Sexuality, in his view, was legitimate only as an instrument of

fertility, it did not have any value of its own. The moral superiority of women was located precisely in their assumed sexlessness. Since nobody else seems to be able to do the job, it seems to be left to the women's movement to answer the question of how sexuality and fertility can be reconciled and to spell out what we mean by control over our sexuality.

Sexuality and Fertility

We are back to the assumption that the link between sexuality and fertility is the dominant problem and that this is the over-riding problem of women since women have to cope with childbearing and with most of childbearing. Sexual maturing more or less coincides with maturing of fertility, though psychology has acknowledged that sexual feelings are common and overt in infants and latently present in growing children. The social assumption is that the awakening of sexuality for a girl coincides with the onset of menstruation. This is the reason for enforced gender segregation and, in earlier times, for child marriage. At the same time, menstruation is linked to ritual pollution, social ostracism and shame and thus both sexuality and fertility get linked up with this kind of negative connotation.

Besides, women seem to be automatic medical cases bound to have "disorders" and, even if healthy, subjected to pre-natal and post-natal check-ups. Menstruation is associated with discomfort, pain, cramps, restricted mobility. Social ostracism of purity and pollution going with it enhances all these aspects, compounded by lack of knowledge about one's physiology. Marriage is seen as a "solution" to many of these problems. Menstrual pain will be less "after marriage" and of course sexuality will be safely under control after marriage as well. As is amply documented in this volume and elsewhere, fertility control has been focussing on women with often very disastrous side-effects and thus it seems that sexual activity makes women more of a medical case, causing bleedings, pain blood-pressure and many, other complaints. The scope to develop a positive attitude towards one's own body and towards one's own sexuality is very narrow within this setting. Even after a woman has undergone tubectomy. It is not she who exerts control over her sexuality.

However, there is another side to this picture. While discussing a health exhibition on human reproduction in North Arcot villages, the women themselves came out with very different observations. While depicting the male and female sexual organs and going into the different aspects of intercourse and fertilization, the women pointed out that In fact the link between sexuality and

fertility lies more in male physiology than in the female. While the male can only reach sexual satisfaction in the form of orgasm when he ejaculates sperm which in turn may lead to fertilization of an egg, it was pointed out that the female organ of sexual pleasure in the form of the clitoris is entirely "useless" and without any function as far as fertility is concerned. Ofcourse, it had been a major step in the learning process to admit in the first place that the clitoris exists. This means that sexual censorship is so strong that plain admission of physiological facts appears sacrilegious. Even mentioning such facts lays us open to allegations of being obsessed with irresponsible pleasure-seeking. The idea that sexual contact need not at all times involve penetration and that the female orgasm is relatively independent of penetration still sounds unusual, to put it mildly.

The one point where aspects of sexuality and fertility are really connected in women's lives is the fact that non-invasive methods of fertility control need male co-operation and that the respect which at least in theory is accorded to motherhood needs to be extended to a woman's whole physical existence. Women's health needs to start from childhood and exist till old age. Women need to be respected as sexual beings with their specific physiology. Health rights have to include sexual rights and responsibility for women's physical condition as a whole, much before and beyond "motherhood". It is often pathetic to see how pregnant women are dumped in their parents' house, the husband not taking responsibility for delivery and children. Likewise, women are abandoned in illness, with hysterectomies, cancer or whatever else may befall them. The husband only takes charge of the right to have sex and to beat her up. Worse things of course could be said about "lovers". It has to be acknowledged that women face life and death issues in fertility control as well as in childbearing.

Sexual intercourse as it is enforced in most cases, depicted in movies and often enough described in sex manuals, most of the time ignores women's physiology, psychology and social situation. As such, it is not only a violation of basic human rights, it is also a highly obscurantist and unscientific way to go about things. It is a male centered mystification.

A non-violent and creative way of fertility control can only go together with a non-violent and creative reconstruction of sexual relations. One of the most obvious cases in point are methods of natural family planning, especially those based on observation of the cycle of mucus discharge which can determine a woman's ovulation with great accuracy and, if properly applied, is as reliable as any other family planning method. In a recent paper read at the national meeting of Medico Friends Circle. Meera Sadgopal has pleaded to include this method of

birth control in people's science campaigns. She has made a very valuable contribution in analyzing on the method and making its scientific content visible. It is however ironic that this method has been practiced and propagated chiefly by Catholic agencies who are the last to endorse a woman's right over her own sexuality. The significant characteristic of this method is that it is, more any other, vested in woman's knowledge and observation of her own body and works with methods of self examination in which women touch their private parts which they are normally educated not to do. These parts of our body are normally supposed not to "belong" to us and not to be touched by ourselves. They are reserved for husbands and medical personnel. Thus, NFP as a method greatly strengthens women's acquaintance, with their own body and decision making about sexual intercourse.

Male and Female Sexuality

While, implicitly a number of differences between male and female sexuality have already been made visible, it is necessary to face a few aspects which need further sorting out. The media project sex, crime and pornography for male audiences and "romantic love" images for the "female psyche". In none of these can women be seen as autonomous thinking, feeling, decision-making beings. They are depicted either simply as "the hole" into which a penis can be thrust or as "the heart" consuming itself in anxiety about the beloved. In both cases to be headless and mindless is considered a major virtue. Both projections are thus male-centered and deny a women's personality. Both projections are also connected to the fact that the servility which is implied in the "romantic love" concept is indirectly enforced by the omnipresent and latent or overt threat of violence. Romantic love implies both, servility and "protection", protection in turn is based on violence. This is what Susan Brownmiller had in mind when she stated that every man benefits from the existence of rape.

The existence and prevalence of rape, incest, pornography and brutality have been made much more visible due to the existence of the women's movement. They are instrumental in enforcing control over women's lives and have a definite bearing on day-to-day relationships.

At the same time, sexuality can express the greatest tenderness that human beings are capable of. The contradiction is unresolved and will take generations to be resolved.

An aspect which needs exploration is the fact that women's bodies are indeed more multi-purpose than men's and are, at least under the violent conditions of patriarchy, more vulnerable. While a woman's breasts are erotically highly sensitive, they also can perform the function of an udder. The vagina which is used in intercourse is also the birth channel, the outlet for menstrual blood and the road for invasive medical investigation and contraception. The most maddening aspect probably is the fact that the sexual act itself can either be enchantment or torture even leading to death. The greatest mystery, overshadowing any intercourse, is the question how men can derive pleasure from a sexual act which annihilates another human being. Here the nexus between sexuality and power becomes most visible. Sexual violence is at the root of patriarchy. It is part of warfare, but also part of daily life.

Some of the best analyses of this problem can be found in *New Internationalist* of April 1986 under the heading 'Give and Take Sex and the Politics of Pleasure', which connects the brutalisation of sexuality with the alienation and exploitative structures of society at large. Debby Taylor evokes the counter-image to a male sexuality of subjugation, in the caring sensuousness of mothering as the matrix for creative and tender sexual relations. Emmanuel Reyman compares the male obsession with "potency", i.e. with erection and ejaculation, size of penis etc. to the need to flex one's muscles to show off brute force. Reyman argues that in reality, sexual power is the least of a man's problems. His real malaise is the absence of pleasure and his real sickness is frigidity. By analogy, if women suffer from frigidity it is due to their lack of power to create a sexuality of sensuousness which is not preoccupied with genital contact as such but with comprehensive loving and caring. Not only this, women are often so much brainwashed to accept sexual stereotypes that they themselves not only perpetuate their own passivity but even expect violence as a sign of "manliness". This is analogous to the popular conviction that if a man doesn't beat his wife he doesn't care for her.

There are some physiological factors which have led to social habits which can be changed. E.g. the fact that orgasm in a man is marked by ejaculation, leads to the habit that intercourse is looked at as "finished" when the man has ejaculated. Whether the woman has had an orgasm or not, he usually does not know. He may simply not be bothered or he may assume she has had one. She may also fake an orgasm to keep him assured of his "performance". Surveys on the matter indicate that this happens quite frequently.

The fact that a woman's orgasms are less easily identifiable to a man because his sensibilities are not trained to perceive the subtle movement, leads to a situation in which women most often have sex without ever experiencing orgasm. The

response is either frustration or an emotional compensation which looks at sex not as primarily goal - oriented" (i.e. "achieving" orgasm) but as an ongoing communication which can be meaningful also without this ultimate climax.

This latter compensation is again made more difficult by men who think it is the only natural thing to have "two or three rounds" and sleep off instantly. Men normally declare this to be "purely physiological". While of course a physiological factor cannot be denied, men with awareness and motivation can easily overcome this. In fact, a woman after orgasm also has the physiological factor of relaxation and tiredness. The point is that most of the time she hasn't had one. So she wants, at least, to communicate, caress, be close. This again contributes to the myth that women are endlessly demanding and sexuality "insatiable". On the whole, men are more likely to use sexuality as an outlet to pass on the tensions of their day-to-day life to women, while women do not have this kind of an outlet. While the penis can be a tool (e.g. for "making pregnant") or a weapon (sex as punishment, conquest etc.), women's sexual equipment (sensitivity of touch and smell) makes sense only in exchange of tenderness and pleasure. However, being constantly subjugated by tremendous lack of sensitivity and ignorance about a woman's body, if not outright violence, women's sensuousness is systematically killed off.

Sexuality and Social Roles

It has become visible that sexual stereotypes are in a very direct way connected with social roles and that sexual subjugation is at the root of all other subjugation's. Of course, a woman who is economically independent may still be sexually exploited and a woman who is economically dependent may be lucky enough to have a husband who treats her well. However, on the whole the crucial point remains that a woman is supposed to be the physical property of her husband and that a woman who is not "controlled" by a husband, is supposed to be "free for all". The whole concept of a woman having control over her own body is virtually unthinkable. This seems to be analogous to other lack of control which is essential to keep women in subjugation. During celebration of international women's day, we used the slogan: "Does a woman ever have a house"? - posing the problem that a woman is a stranger to the house of her birth and to the house of her inlaws as well. Likewise, one could ask: "Does a woman ever have a body".

Does she ever inhabit her body in her own rights? Similarly, women often have no right to own land and even if they do get involved in agriculture and do virtually all the operations, they are not allowed to touch the plough.

The other important aspect which cringes into the picture if one analyses the connection between sexuality and social roles is sexual division of labor. It is a common saying that men are born to be "always on top", in society, in the family and in bed. If feminists have pointed out that sexual intercourse can be more satisfying to a woman if she lies on top since in this case her clitoris is more easily stimulated, this may be dismissed as erotic imagination. However, the tenacity with which women are kept "down" socio-economically as well as sexually, in fact betrays a hidden knowledge of existing connections. It is true that the world will be turned upside down if women are not "controlled" sexually because sexual suppression and cruelty as well as sheer insensitivity, are deeply related to all other forms of subjugation, torture and indifference.

The present pattern is that women are property and that men are not answerable in their sexual behavior. We are striving for a situation where no human being is owned by another, but where everybody is answerable in mutual responsibility and compassion. Intercourse requires consent, including in marriage, and violence has to be eliminated in every form, inside and outside marriage. Sexual freedom cannot be the freedom of the consumer society which makes sex a commodity and human beings objects. Being knowledgeable about our bodies and learning to love tenderly sounds simple enough a task, but the barriers which prevent us and others from doing so are gigantic and need to be dismantled piece by piece.

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