

Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
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Lecture-20
Theorising Violence Heteronormativity and Sexuality

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture we mapped gender-based violence also known as GBV to understand different kinds of physical forms of violence enacted on women. We saw that in feminist discussions the concept of violence has been theorized predominantly in the form of physical and sexual violence directed towards women. Such forms of violence represent the obvious instances of visible violence.

Now you have to remember that violence can and has been understood in conceptual terms as well. Violence is executed not just through force but also through disadvantaging discriminating and discriminations of different kinds. Such as discrimination at workplace displacement, forced movements and so on. Additionally, it would be wrong to assume that violence is a homogeneous form that is inflicted on women alone.

As we have learned throughout the course there are different kinds of violence that affect different marginalized groups differently. For example, we have seen how dowry is a Brahminical concept, how Mathura's rape arose from caste, gender assumptions and so on? Similarly, we need to unpack how other identity groups are impacted by gender-based violence.

In this lecture we will talk about heteronormativity and sexuality and how they specifically disadvantaged groups which do not fall under the binaristic norms of men and women. As we have seen in earlier lectures Indian feminism in the 1980s have crested with making visible sexuality in the public sphere in the form of heterosexual violence on women and seeking legal remedies for those.

By 1990s as Nivedita Menon mentions sexuality began to appear in feminist politics and scholarship in a variety of forms still concerned with sexual violence certainly but increasingly recast as desire going beyond the bounds of heteronormativity. Now before we go into the details of how sexuality is played out vis-a-vis heteronormative forms of control we first need to learn what sexuality is?

According to John and Nair sexuality does not signify biological genitality but connotes a way of addressing sexual relations, their spheres of legitimacy and illegitimacy through the institutions and practices as well as the discourses and forms of representation that have long been producing framing, distributing and controlling the subject of sex. According to Nivedita Menon normative heterosexuality is premised on caste and gender terms.

Marriage as a heterosexual union is primarily intended to ensure the birth of a progeny who would continue the line of the father, but this procreative sexuality also needs to be legitimate. That is within the bounds of marriage limited by caste and community boundaries. This is why Ambedkar argued that in order to annihilate caste endogamy should be replaced by inter-caste marriage.

He writes where society is already well knit by other ties marriage is an ordinary incident of life, but where society is cut us under marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy of breaking caste is inter-caste marriage; nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste. Nivedita Menon emphasizes that it is absolutely imperative to incorporate the issue of heteronormativity in feminist analysis especially in the analysis of family.

She argues that feminism's extensive criticism of specific issues such as dowry and domestic violence ironically and also implicitly reinforces the idea that a normal heterosexual family would be free of such violence. Interestingly the very structure of the family is accepted to be heterosexual only the gradations of violence and women's condition are measured. Menon argues that such analysis does not question the edifice of family at all.

In fact, it accepts heterosexual patriarchal family as marker of social stability. The focus on dowry and domestic violence becomes an issue only when such stability is disturbed. Menon notes that while it is necessary to address such forms of violence it is also necessary to question how the premise of family remains heteronormative? That is why she urges us to reorient our focus from heterosexuality to procreative heterosexuality.

And analyze how it creates specific forms of oppression and violence not only on women but on those who do not fall under the category of heteronormativity. Let me substantiate this argument with a story titled Mona's story. Although the title has story incorporated within it,

it is actually about the life of Mona as narrated by Urvashi Butalia. Mona's story discovers Mona Ahmed's struggle for the right to choose one's sexuality.

Mona reveals the story of a person who does not want to remain confined within any identity given by nature in her case a male or prescribed by the society that is of a man. As we see in the story, she often succeeds to a certain extent in switching the identities according to her need. However, the fluidity of her identity comes at the cost of numerous losses. She loses parents and siblings in order to join the Hijra community and as she finally begins to feel comfortable among them, they ostracize her when she decides to adopt a child and become a mother.

The Hijra Community liberates her from the society which imposes the so-called normalcy on Mona. Any digression from normalcy is severely punished either by Mona's father or by the Maulana. However, Mona comes across a different oppressive structure within the Hijra community. Chaman who assumes the role of a patriarch sets new rules to replace the old ones which seem equally oppressive as before.

Mona is not only restricted from visiting her home but is also punished for her inversion of identity because such ambivalence about identity was not simply allowed. So, Mona was not allowed to change her gender whenever she visited home. Moreover, Chaman use of punishment resembles the legal system of the so-called normal world which validates violence to remove violence in the hands of law.

In the Hijra community disobedience resistance even questioning are often punished with violence or worse ostracism. By making the rule of choosing only one sexual identity the Hijra community which gives shelter to Mona therefore reproduces the traditional binary of man and woman. Mona thus appears as a problem even in the Hijra Community with her fleeting desire to change her sexual identity.

Confined within the boundaries of home Mona is forced to be submissive to the patriarchal norms that rob her of any individuality she might have possessed. There is an episode in the story where the writer comes across Mona in her house without clothes. The scene shocks the writer but Mona remains unaffected. Through the embarrassment the writer feels when she sees

Mona without any clothes is reflective of how the society creates our notions of body as something shameful and dirty.

Something that should be kept a secret. So, much so that even the writer who is biologically a female is ashamed to look at another female body, because she has learned to cover her body and its desires in the cover of tradition, religion and class. This is why the writer's embarrassment about Mona's body is quickly associated with her fear of being in a largely poor and Muslim place.

However, as she gradually realizes this presumed hostile place beside the graveyard is more liberating than the normal atmosphere she lives in because she can claim herself to be a human. Irrespective of the identities her biology, her family, her society, her religion, her class and caste ascribed to her. Mona's awareness about her sexuality merges with her political awareness when she decides to join the Hijra community.

Thereby transforming an individual everyday practice into a collective position to intervene and question heterosexuality. Mona's position becomes an iconic counter heteronormative standpoint in two ways. Firstly, by becoming aware of our femininity and by switching the identity according to her wish and secondly by her desire to become a mother. Now the convention of motherhood conveniently desexualizes the woman and transforms her into a figure of nurture and care.

Moreover, motherhood is imagined as a possibility only in heterosexual familial constructions. With motherhood two things that are most prominently connected are marriage and procreation. While marriage establishes heterosexuality as the rule procreation goes one step further to legitimize the child as a carrier of those norms. In Mona's case therefore when she decides to adopt a child, she not only defies the institutions of marriage and reproduction but also as a man by her birth who now performs the role of a mother with equal care and love as a woman mother is supposed to show.

This is why even after being a feminist who is aware that motherhood is not restricted to biological reproduction. The author is amazed at how Mona breaks every barrier of sex and gender identities and makes an easily movable position which she can assume as per her choice. Interestingly she is friendly with everyone around her and the respect Mona for who she is

Butalia does not document Mona's life in the written form but Mona has already become part of the resistance movement as she proudly asserts her femininity.

It is interesting how the author is faced with the class hierarchy as she fears that Mona would not be treated well in the restaurant she visits. She recounts a conversation with an Australian lesbian feminist who detested the Hijras on the account that the man pretending to be a woman has come and taken over the space feminists made for themselves. Mona's choice for a place of her own has led her to travel through identities.

The author's own initial misunderstanding about the Hijra people comes to a result when Mona says I am a woman but sometimes I can be a man I do not like being one. This calls for a need to bridge the gap between feminism and queer practices. As Nivedita Menon would also argue because only then will they be able to disrupt the social and cultural oppressions that not only target women but also erase the space for an alternative sexuality to exist.

Now let us summarize today's lecture. Today we talked about heteronormativity as creating a very one-sided idea of violence and one-sided resolution to it. As Menon rightly points out while the focus on dowry deaths and domestic violence have contributed tremendously in shaping a feminist consciousness against violence, they have also made heterosexual families as norms.

Feminist analysis in its understanding of violence therefore needs to begin at the very root by questioning the premise of heteronormativity. This expansion is beneficial in two ways. Firstly, it expands the scope to incorporate not just women but also others who are affected by gender-based violence and secondly it shows that violence need not always be physical or sexual.

Displacement of different kinds are also reflective of violence and this is what we see through Mona. Mona faces violence as a transgender Muslim in a Hijra community. So, her experience is specific and that specificity needs to be recognized. Now it is not enough to say that gender-based violence creates only victimhood. There are many instances where violence is used to counter violence. In the next class we will discuss how such methods are used. Thank you.

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