

# Sexuality: a Feminist Issue?

by Sunila Abeysekera

SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

**T**he control of female sexuality is a critical element of patriarchy. In primitive societies, once the connection between reproduction and the male was discovered, the need to “own” and “control” the woman’s reproductive capacity as well as the fruits of her womb became an integral part of male “being.”

At times one senses that there was also a fear, sometimes an awe, of female sexuality and fertility, in many communities, through time. This is obvious when one looks at a range of traditions, cultural practices, customs and religious injunctions that address the need to keep women under male control. The portrayal of woman as the Madonna and as the whore

concept of sexuality encompasses a wide range of sexual behaviour and practice that is “alternative” to the dominant mode. It could include homosexuals, gays and lesbians; but certainly also, from the point of view of the struggle for sexual self-determination and sexual autonomy of women, this category could include single women, widows, celibates. Some of these women have been “prohibited” from having sex by the state, by religion or by the community—on the basis that they are too young, too old, married, unmarried, virgins who must guard their hymen since it is the most valuable object they possess. Some could be women who have decided not to have sex with men, and others could be women who have decided not to have

**SEXUALITY:** “A technicolour spectrum of biology, experience, psychology, behaviour, society, ideation. The spectrum starts with the more social, shades imperceptibly into the psychological and lastly becomes biological; gender role, sexual activity, sensuality, sexual orientation, fantasy, pleasure, desire, gender identity, reproduction. (Muriel Dimen 1981, 66) Source: *Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary*, 1992.

**LESBIANISM:** is a woman’s choice to give women primacy in her life—emotionally, personally, politically. (Rita Mae Brown 1976, 98) Source: *Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary*, 1992.

created a dichotomy which we still see reflected in works of art, literature, the cinema; the creation of stereotypes of the “good” woman as opposed to the “bad” woman. The bad woman is usually the one who is free with her sexuality, and sometimes with her “sexual favors”; she is “sexy,” while the “good” woman is chaste, virginal, and asexual.

In more recent times, the discussion about sexuality has become focused on alternative sexual practices. In some fora, speaking about sexuality has become synonymous with speaking about lesbians. Yet, in actual fact, the

sex at all. All of them are women who defy mainstream sexual codes and patterns of behaviour and are therefore particularly vulnerable to punishment. Sexual transgression is a heinous crime in most of our societies today.

I have recently been working on the issue of the reflection of female sexuality in the Sinhala cinema. I am developing the thesis that in this cinematic genre, there are only four alternatives open to a woman who dares to transgress the boundaries of community taboos about sex: She can go mad, she can commit suicide, she can be killed, or she can join religious orders. In

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film after film, I watch endless women going mad, killing themselves, being killed, or becoming a nun. The penalty for expressing one's sexuality is most severe.

What constitutes sexuality? Sexual practice, certainly. Sexual preference. Who you have sex

## THE TENSION BETWEEN PLEASURE AND DANGER IS A POWERFUL ONE IN WOMEN'S LIVES.

with, and how. Sexual desire. Sexual pleasure. How you derive sexual pleasure and what your sexual fantasies are. What you dream of when you dream about sex. Who do you find "sexy," and why.

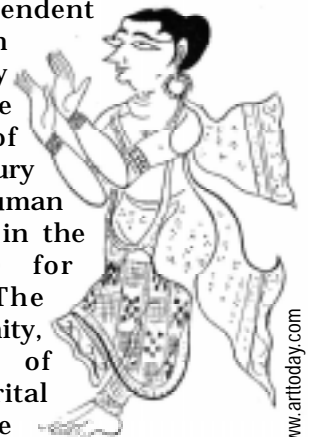
The tension between pleasure and danger is a powerful one in women's lives. The exercise of our sexuality can be pleasurable, a joyous exploration; it can also be fraught with guilt, repression and sanction. The negative side of our sexuality is that which victimises us, which makes us vulnerable to all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, such as rape and incest and bondage against our will. This vulnerability makes us aware, sometimes too aware, of the potential dangers of exercising our sexuality. The threat of sexual attack is one of the most powerful tools of control of women in contemporary society.

This element of danger has terrible consequences for us as women. We grow to fear our own sexuality. We learn to deny our own capacity for pleasure. Why is the female orgasm so mysterious, and why is it so elusive for some women? Why does it evade so many women for all their life? Is it because our bodies have been so well trained and our minds so well fettered that we simply cannot experience that moment of climax, of absolute abandonment?

Because our sexual desires are so well hidden and so cleverly masked by social norms and "acceptable" forms of behaviour, they lie deep in our psyche, emerging only in our dreams. We fantasise about sex but most of us would never admit it, not even to ourselves. Because "good" women don't do THAT! Oral sex was a taboo subject a century ago. Today it is

quite an accepted part of sexual practice. Anal sex is perhaps still a bit dicey; after all, sodomy remains on many of our law books as a criminal offense. Gay and lesbian sex is titillating to the nonhomosexual; the numbers of so-called straight (heterosexual) people who enjoy gay and lesbian erotica is revealing in itself. How many of us harbour a desire to have sex with someone of our own sex, or to have sex in what would be to us, in our own context, an unorthodox way? Most disturbing to many of us is sadomasochism in sex. Hurt? Pain? We seem incredulous, but indeed pain and pleasure are also quite intimately connected sensations. Bondage, beating, tantalising, using "mild" forms of torture—are these "allowed" forms of sexual behaviour? And what about that most thorny question of all? What about pornography? Why has the production and reproduction of images of sexual behaviour become a globally marketable commodity? All these are issues related to our own perception of sexuality.

The other critical area of discussion relating to sexuality is the way in which certain types of sexual practice and behaviour are privileged over others, by social and cultural norms that are based on the acceptance of certain forms of social and economic stratification and hierarchy. For example, sex within marriage is sanctioned by the law, therefore by the state, and also by religion and by the community. Sex outside marriage is still taboo in many societies; the nuclear family remains the norm as does the belief that sex must of necessity be for procreation. The idea of sex for pleasure, of sex unrelated to, and independent from reproduction is still an outrageous one for many communities, although the development of contraceptives in this century has for the first time in human history created a space in the human existence for nonprocreative sex. The premium placed on virginity, the condemnation of premarital and extramarital sex, as well as the



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criminalising of certain forms of sexual practice including homosexuality, all point to the difficulties experienced by us and by our societies in accepting and appreciating the variety of human sexualities that are around us and are an integral part of those we live with and love.

Within the women's movement, the issue of sexuality has been a difficult area of discussion. Feminists who were ready to challenge many stereotypes and to defy the norms of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family, were, at least right up to the early 1980s, reluctant to take on issues of sexuality as a part of our own agenda. Part of it was, perhaps, self-interest. By the mid-1980s, we had achieved a certain degree of acceptance and recognition that we didn't want to endanger by raising troublesome and controversial issues. We wanted some space in which to enjoy the fruits of our labour. We feared the backlash from the conservative and right-wing groups who viewed unfettered sexuality as an aberration, as flying in the face of God. We didn't want to be called lesbians. We wanted to enter the mainstream as legitimate actors in the male world. In our desire to break the glass ceiling, we forgot many of our sisters—the one who were as oppressed by class differences, by racism, or by compulsory heterosexuality as they were by patriarchy. Our theoretical and conceptual understanding of patriarchy extended to an understanding of the ways in which it interacted with other axes of power such as capitalism and various ideologies of racial or ethnic supremacy. However, it didn't really include any deep understanding of differences within and among women. Our belief in sisterhood and solidarity proved to be very deceptive.

Our inability to really evolve feminist ways of dealing with difference, whether it was between women and men, or between women and women during this period of our history has created certain divisions among us that are very visible and problematic even today.

In 1984, Carol Vance asked a series of questions:

- ◆ are male and female sexual natures essentially different or the product of specific historical and cultural conditions?

- ◆ has women's sexuality been muted by repression, or is it wholly different from men's?
- ◆ does the source of sexual danger to women lie in an intrinsically aggressive or violent male nature, or in the patriarchal conditions that socialise male sexuality to aggression and female sexuality to compliance and submission?
- ◆ how can male sexual violence be reduced or eliminated?
- ◆ how does the procreative possibility of sex enter into women's experience of sexuality?
- ◆ should feminism be promoting maximum or minimum differentiation in the sexual sphere, and what shape should either vision take?

These questions remain valid even today, fifteen years after. In fact, in a world in which we face the AIDS epidemic, the development of movements for gay and lesbian rights, the visibility of homosexuals in many modern societies, whether with sanction or without it, many of our assumptions about sexuality and sexual practice are being challenged in a very fundamental way. We are being pushed to consider the issue of difference within the feminist movements worldwide, and to deal with it. Our right to sexual autonomy has been recognised and hotly debated in international fora such as the Fourth World Conference on Women.

Today, we live in a world where it is accepted that there are various forms of family; it is accepted that women and men have reproductive and sexual RIGHTS to engage in sex free from discrimination, coercion and violence; it is accepted that many diverse forms of sexual practice can coexist harmoniously if there is tolerance and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.

It is in this spirit that the feminist movement must continue with its dialogue on sexuality, building bridges with lesbians and other women who live lives of sexual nonconformity and are marginalised and ostracised because of their courageous choices. ♪

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