

FEMININITY AND THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

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Abstract: Redefining femininity from an Eastern perspective, the article “Femininity and the Feminine Mystique” explores why sexuality plays a major role in our understanding of Eastern feminism. As an Indian feminist, many of Dr. Sarojini Sahoo’s writings deal candidly with female sexuality, the emotional lives of women, and the intricate fabric of human relationships, depicting extensively about the interior experiences of women, and how their burgeoning sexuality is seen as a threat to traditional patriarchal societies. This article therefore covers topics that have never been discussed so far in any Indian discourse. Her debatable concept on feminism, her denial of Simone De Beauvoir’s “the Other theory”, make her a prominent feminist personality of South Asia – for which KINDLE Magazine of India has placed her among 25 exceptional mindset women of India.¹

While surfing through *Wikipedia*, I came upon an old story from the Bible, as told by Rabbi Joshua:

God deliberated from what member He would create woman, and He reasoned with Himself thus: I must not create her from Adam's head, for she would be a proud person, and hold her head high. If I create her from the eye, then she will wish to pry into all things; if from the ear, she will wish to hear all things; if from the mouth, she will talk much; if from the heart, she will envy people; if from the hand, she will desire to take all things; if from the feet, she will be a gadabout. Therefore I will create her from the member which is hid, that is the rib, which is not even seen when man is naked.

This article represents a patriarchal view of what a woman should be in their eye. A woman should not hold her head high; should not wish to pry into all things;

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¹I want to dedicate this article to Julie Bodhi Deepika from Belgium whose mails inspired me to write this essay.

would not wish to hear all things that man could hear; should keep her mouth shut against all the mischievous acts of a masculine world; and should talk less and leave desire to take anything, and even will not envy. It sums up that femininity, then, simply means frilly, flouncy, flippant, frivolous, and fluff-brained.

There are significant gender differences in how women and men socially construct the meaning of femininity in their lives, particularly concerning the intersection of gender, sexuality, and power. Freudian psychoanalyst theory says since women lack the visible genitals of the male, they feel they are “missing” the most thing central necessary for gaining narcissistic value and therefore, they develop a sense of gender inequality and penis envy, which in later periods, has related to power struggles between the genders. Freud said a little girl when observing the difference between the genital organ of her father or brother and the similarity with her mother, can notice her status of being the second sex, the less dominant sex. From this time of noticing, a girl possesses envy towards the male role model and tries to compare and identify herself with the male role model as the power holder.

According to Freud, sex is the most powerful instinct in humans. This tendency later develops into an Oedipus Complex and an Electra Complex. Being a woman, I can say that this “penis envy” is not at all a significant point for femininity. It is not a proper place to discuss this topic in detail, but I referred to this Freudian psychoanalysis theory, as I have an idea that the formation of genital organs in male and female might have a link with their masculinity and femininity. The male genital is projected outward whereas that of a female remains inward. These structures may create the different characteristics among both genders. Femininity, so an introvert in nature to which some psychoanalysis termed as “passive” while the extrovert masculinity for its outward projection of genital organ as “active”. Gerard Hendrik Hofstede, the Dutch scholar (I have discussed and compared his theory with that of Ashish Nandy in one of my earlier essays) described these differences as “Quantity of Life” and “Quality of Life” respectively.

I solely believe that both masculinity and femininity are different, but they are always complimentary to each other. We cannot say which one is superior and which one is inferior. In Samkhya Upanishad, the philosophers of the Vedic period named these as *Prakruti* and *Purusha*. But in their concept, *Purusha* (masculinity) is passive and *Prakruti* (femininity) is “active.”

“Samkhya philosophy” also described the creation of life with this

Prakruti-Purusha concept. According to this philosophy, this *Prakruti* is an all pervasive but complex primal substance which is transformed into multifarious nature. The original entity is not found in its original form but remains in a state of equilibrium and in a non-modified condition. This eternal and infinite principle is lifeless and consists of three inter-reliant and interchangeable elements called the “*gunas*”, which consists of three parts: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. These *gunas* are not the qualities but rather the constituent parts of *Prakruti*. They give complexity to *Mula* (original) *Prakruti*.

But *Purusha* is inactive and passive, but also alert and infinite and eternal. Under the inscrutable influence of *Purusha*, the equilibrium in *Prakruti* is disturbed and the whole universe of unlimited permutations and combinations comes into existence. The first modification of *Prakruti*, primordial nature, is called *Mahat* or Cosmic Intelligence. It further involutes into two forces, 1) *Akasha*, the primal matter, and 2) *Prana*, the primal energy. *Akasha* forms the material basis and *Prana* the energy basis of creation. From the interaction between *Akasha* and *Prana* are formed five delicate elements, crudely translated as Ether, Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. In various proportions, these are the constituents of all the matter existing in the universe. As can be seen, even *Mahat* or Intelligence is matter consisting of three *gunas* and five elements.

I believe the role of femininity can be explained in no other way. Femininity is thus considered as *Shakti* or a source of energy in ancient Indian Philosophy. It is a regrettable and astonishing fact that while discussing “femininity”, we discuss Christian ideology or psychoanalysts’ point of view but never has anyone addressed the idea of this Indian philosophy in these discussions.

It is correct that the word femininity has not been heard very often as compared to the word “feminist”. I have observed that in the West, only the Christian religious scholars discuss more about “femininity” while the feminist scholars did not like to utter this word “femininity” partly because of stereotypes as opposed to archetypes. They were dedicated to the proposition that the difference between men and women is a matter of mere biology and some of these feminists tried to avoid the word altogether or whenever possible, denying femininity a reality of Nature’s design and making.

On the other hand, throughout the millennia of human history up until the past two decades or so, people took for granted that the differences between men and women were so obvious as to need no comment. They accepted the way things were. Patriarchal society also used this hypothesis as an issue of the gender

power battle with male hegemony and adherence to traditional male and female roles. For centuries, the concept of “femininity” has been used for transforming patriarchy, making females to be subordinate in a masculine world. Femininity has always been used with a double standard by patriarchy.

While a nude art or its artist receive appreciation for the aesthetism from society, at the same time, the model has also been criticised for lacking the modesty of femininity. In the name of sexual objectification, both patriarchy and feminism have never adored femininity in any real sense. They impose many taboos and regulation on femininity in the name of keeping it safe and secure.

It is no doubt that due to feminist movement and discourse, we now have the opportunity to express ourselves; to make ourselves more visible in social perspectives; and to embrace our sexuality and sensuality. As Julie relates: “But still, women also have issues. For instance, many girls and women in the West don't totally accept themselves as they are because of the beauty standards the media and society imposes on us. The focus is so much on outward appearance rather than inner beauty.”

And she goes on: “Women also experience so much pressure. They want a career, be independent, have a household, kids, etc., etc....And manage that, ALL at the same time. Still, every woman wants to be feminine and beautiful with her dresses, jewelry, and modest attitudes. They want to be very beautiful and soft, but at the same time, strong. And that kind of women I see as my inspiration -- a humble, kind, loving woman, but at the same time, strong and intelligent.”

In earlier articles, I have discussed these matters in detail to show not only how both patriarchal society and the feminists make the rules and regulations, but they create new taboos to make women more controlled in the name of “freedom”.

Even so, women are subjugated and controlled in the name of “modesty” as well as ignored in the social perspective. Their term of femininity is misunderstood and misused either by patriarchy or by the apostles of the so-called radical feminism. Personally, I never find any difference between modern femininity and feminism, if we consider feminism as a goal to make females strong enough to mark their identity against becoming invisible by those who want them to be. We should be thankful to our predecessor feminists who have made patriarchal man turn into a new masculine entity – one who believes in gender equality.

I believe femininity is related to “*shakti*” and being “*shaktified*” (I borrowed

this word from my friend Wahkeena Sitka's article "What Is *Shakti*?"² We could include power of intelligence (*buddhi*), compassion (*daya*), and divine love (*bhakti*) in our femininity. I also believe that this femininity has a wonderful power.

In our de-gendered times, a really feminine woman is a joy to behold who can love and unleash her own unique yet universal femininity. We are here for gender sensitivity to proclaim the differences between men and women with a kind of pretence that we are all the same. Too many women have been de-feminized by society.

To be feminine today is to know how to pay attention to detail and people, to have people skills, and to know how to connect to and work well with others. There will be particular times and situations in which you'll want to be more in touch and in tune with your femininity. Being able to choose is a great privilege and a great skill.

Whenever we discuss femininity, questions arise concerning piety, purity, submissiveness, and the definition of true womanhood. This comes to the front of the discussions about free love, the end of marriage, the feminization of men and of being, as well as becoming a female sex object. A false belief prevails everywhere that a feminist who believes in the sexual rights of women (I hate to say "sex-positive" in any context) is a "porn supporter feminist". Porn, I think, is a misogynist attitude which promotes the idea that women are always born to free their body for the pleasures of men, and women are shown in a subordinate role. Pornography contributes to sexism, violence against women, is a cause of rape, and also eroticizes the domination, humiliation, and coercion of women. The so-called sex war among feminists of the late seventies and early eighties had divided feminists in two distinct groups: anti-porn feminist and sex-positive feminists.

The anti-porn feminists like Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Robin Morgan, Diana Russell, Alice Schwarzer, and Robert Jensen—argue that pornography is harmful to women, and constitutes a strong causality or facilitation of violence against women. On the other side, sex-positive feminists like Camille Paglia, Ellen Willis, Susie Bright, Patrick Califia, Gayle Rubin, Carol Queen, Annie Sprinkle, Avedon Carol, Tristan Taormino, and Betty Dodson argue that sexual freedom is an essential component of women's freedom. They

²Please see: <http://www.wahkeenasitka.com/tag/shakti/>.

see sexual orientation and gender as social constructs which are heavily influenced by society and that patriarchy limits sexual expression. They are in favor of giving people of all genders more sexual opportunities, rather than restricting pornography. Sex-positive feminists generally reject sexual essentialism as they believe sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions.

What is wrong with anti-porn feminists is they reduced the sexual needs of women and many of them were against heterosexuality as the normal fashion prevailing at that time by second-wave feminists. To deny male supremacy in the sexual act (which I think a very odd idea to admit), they argued and showed their fascination towards same-sex alliances or lesbianism. If we look at the biographies of such feminists, we can find a lot of instances where they admit lesbianism and other sexualities that deviate from societal norms. (Readers please note that anti-porn or sex-negative or radical feminists are in some ways similar to the sex-positive feminists)

The sex-positive movement does not, in general, make moral or ethical distinctions between heterosexual or homosexual sex (or indeed masturbation) for people who are otherwise celibate, regarding these choices as matters of personal preference. On the other hand, in the name of rebellion against male dominancy, the radical and anti-porn feminists do not support heterosexual relationships. They believe that sexual disparities between the sexes make it impossible to resolve the main issues in society. They believe marriage is a defining feature of women's oppression. They are against motherhood and childbearing because patriarchy recognizes maternity as the key element for a relationship of dominance and exploits others for its own benefit. These male hatred attitudes bring the second-wave feminists to a place where they and the sex-positive feminists find space under the same umbrella from a sexuality perspective.

The real question, sexual rights of women or women's right over their own bodies remains neglected in the war of these two radical groups of feminists. When sex-positive feminists argue that the sexual freedom of women is essential to the overall freedom of women and thus, there should not be limitations such as social policy or societal stigma placing restrictions on sex trade workers (McElroy), they often forget that the sex trade is not a freedom, and no woman can choose this profession by their own motive of heart. They are bound to choose such a profession, and it is patriarchy which oppresses them by this pathetic profession. Prostitution is a tool for the oppression, domination and

humiliation of women, which reinforces the cultural toleration of physical, verbal and sexual violence against women. By assimilating sexual freedom within the sex trade, we are diminishing the importance of women's rights over their own bodies, and we are forcing them to be oppressed by patriarchy.

In total, we can see the terms "sex" and "female sexuality" have been totally misinterpreted in Western feminism discourse. Sexuality is not only a bodily matter, and it does not limit itself to only sexual behavior and sexual activities, though they are major factors. Most of the real meaning of female sexuality is relatively embedded with her body as well mind.

Let us discuss how the "body" of a female acquired its place throughout Western discourse. In the nineteenth century, when the "Contagious Diseases Act" (1864) was enforced in Britain, women were forcibly examined for venereal disease, the "body" also came into prominence. Josephine Butler was the prominent figure to raise her voice through the campaign. In feminists' history, we find the Seneca Falls Convention (July 19-20, 1848)³ does not mention the body, it was first mentioned as a marker of race and class differences within the feminist movement by Sojourner Truth in her famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?"⁴ at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851. Truth told in her speech, "I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash a well! And ain't I a woman?"

However, credit goes to Simone De Beauvoir, who embodied the "female body" with a philosophical strategy. In the first chapter of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir reviews the data of biology, and later she provides an account of the phenomenology of the body as lived throughout the different stages of a woman's life. Here she is explicitly offering her narrative as an account of lived experience; the body in situations and not as part of the data of biology. She discusses social issues primarily affecting women in our culture, such as birth control, abortion, the family, sexual discrimination and harassment, and rape. Though Beauvoir begins her book with women's bodies, she later she states that "connoisseurs" do not declare every human with a uterus as a woman. "It would appear then," she

³<http://www.npg.si.edu/col/seneca/senfalls1.htm>

⁴http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain't_I_a_Woman%3F

writes, “that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity.” Beauvoir thus rejects the female body and from that time onward, feminist philosophy has been denying the need of a female body or female sexuality, and their only aim was in liberating women from reproductive tasks. Women were barred from beauty consciousness and from using cosmetics or fashionable dress and “femininity” of a female was considered as the “negative” aspects of her nature. Luce Irigaray, a Belgian feminist, philosopher, linguist, psychoanalyst, sociologist and cultural theorist identified this ‘masculinism’ of feminists in her well-known book *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) (translated by G. C. Gill, and published by Cornell University Press, Ithaca). She pointed out that in the thoughts of these feminists, man was presented as the universal norm, and sexual difference was not recognized or recognized in such a way that woman was conceptualized as the ‘maternal-feminine,’ which had been left behind in the move to abstract thought.

I don’t know the actual facts and happenings with an infant girl-child, but in Asian and African countries, it’s a regular practice to breastfeed girls for a shorter time than boys so that women can try to get pregnant again with a boy as soon as possible. In the case of adolescent girls, they are provided with less food than their brothers by their own mothers. As a result, girls miss out on life-giving nutrition during a crucial time in their development, which stunts their growth and weakens their resistance to disease. Sunita Kishor published a survey report in *American Sociological Review* (April 1993). In her article “‘May God Give Sons to All’: Gender and Child Mortality in India,” she writes “despite the increased ability to command essential food and medical resources associated with development, female children [in India] do not improve their survival chances relative to male children with gains in development. Relatively high levels of agricultural development decrease the life chances of females while leaving males’ life chances unaffected; urbanization increases the life chances of males more than females...Clearly, gender-based discrimination in the allocation of resources persists and even increases, even when availability of resources is not a constraint.” Is this not gender discrimination as related to the body of a female?

It may be possible that the girl-child in Western countries would not have to suffer like those of Asian and African countries. I am saying this because the sex ratio of different countries alongside the globe is very much striking to note that

in Western countries, the female population in comparison to 1,000 males is: in the Russian Federation: 1,140; in Japan: 1,040; in USA: 1,029; and in Brazil: 1,025. But this ratio is different when we turn towards Asian countries. It is 1,004 in Indonesia, 983 in Bangladesh, 934 in China, 933 in India and 944 in China.⁵ The population of females in India is still diminishing and in comparison to 1,000 males the female population is 1901, 972; in 1901, 962; in 1902, 955; in 1921, 955; in 1921, 950; in 1931, 945; in 1941, 946; in 195, 941; in 1961, 930; in 1971, 934; in 1981, 927; in 1991; and 933 in 2001 (Source: Census).

Big Sin in *The Los Angeles Times*, where the author notes that in Jaipur, capital of the western state of Rajasthan, prenatal sex determination tests result in an estimated 3,500 abortions of female fetuses annually. Most strikingly, according to UNICEF, “A report from Bombay in 1984 on abortions after prenatal sex determination stated that 7,999 out of 8,000 of the aborted fetuses were females.” Sex determination has become a lucrative business. The same tradition of infanticide and abandonment, especially of females, existed in China before the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949, and now it has been increased as the government enforced its ‘one-child policy’ since 1979 to control spiraling population growth. Each and every parent wants to see a male child.

Besides female body conception, if we take a look at the sexual status of women, the facts appear to be more alarming. Nobody asks a bride about her desire and wishes before marriage as arranged marriages are still considering shameful activities over chaste as pre marital sex and love are still shameful actions for a parent in India. Though the Supreme Court of India has supported individual rights and made it very clear that premarital sex and live-in relationships are not criminal offences, still these are confined as rare cases in metro cities in India and are not looked upon favourably.

I am unable to understand if two adult males or two adult females want to live together, what is the offense? Without talking about morals, God, culture, custom, religion and traditions, can someone explain exactly why do we disapprove of such relationships? What more you add to the lives of two people, to whom we would force to adjust, adopt, and accommodate for the rest of their marital relationship? Is it not better in the long run to “try before you buy” instead of two married adults living in constant pain, stress, and suffering? Even though divorce is also not recognized as a prestigious and general social norm in the case

⁵Source: *World Population Prospects*, United Nations 1998-2000.

of Hindus or Catholic Christians, yet society accepts plural marriages (though illegal in the eyes of law in case of Hindus and Christians and legal in the case of Muslims) for males while plural marriage of a woman is still a reverie in any society.

In marital life in India and many other countries around the world, a woman has no sexual rights. She cannot express her desires and is not supposed to enjoy sex as it is told in the Hindu code that a wife is needed only for giving birth to a “male child.” Expressing her own desire for sex or talking freely about orgasm to even one’s own husband may also be termed as a chaste less and debasing activity for a woman. Though the Women and Child Development Ministry (WCD) and the National Commission for Women (NCW) have advised the government to amend the 1973 Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and the 1872 Indian Evidence Act to recognize new categories of sexual assault by redefining rape to include sexual assault (including domestic sexual assault) of any form in its definition, still, most married woman are facing such marital rapes in their daily lives.

But talking about these “dicey” topics by a woman is considered vulgar. Also, nobody thinks it proper to ask a woman before subjecting her to the killing of her fetus yet now, in some parts of India, ‘honor killings’ are granted if a woman steps out of bounds—by choosing her own husband, by flirting in public, or by seeking divorce from an abusive partner—she has brought dishonor to her family. Yet all these matters are related to a woman’s body and still, that woman has no right to make any of her own decisions.

In summary, perspectives of sexuality in Asian and African countries are totally different from those of Western countries. The question of either supporting pornography or denying it remains baseless in those countries, and the main question still remains unsolved as to whether a woman can be empowered to make her own decision about marriage, motherhood, parenthood, abortion, use of contraceptives, and expressing her will and rights for a sexual relationship.