

# *Lesbian Standpoint*

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## **prefacing the monograph / introducing this series**

This monograph carries the footprints of a journey that began over two decades ago, around 1987. A journey that started in the corridors of science – corridors suffused with the history, the legends, and the grammar of the ‘political’ as we found written, but written *only in the corridors*. A journey that has brought us to the far more volatile and unfixed stories of the political as we rewrite them.

Some three (or four, or five ... how can we say how many?) of us had set out to build careers in medicine, albeit with the intention of becoming good, humane clinicians. (It was and still is, we presume, our naïve belief that successful [read moneyed] doctors are not good clinicians and never good humans, so this was an onerous task). At the time, we were sure that a really ‘good doctor’ implied a good human being, although it was not clear which preceded the other. Our heroines were, at any rate, the greatest humanists, offering the added promise that women could not only do it, they *were* the ones to do it.

Our co-habitation with medicine proved exhilarating at first, as we explored both the halls of science – in our classrooms – *and the corridors*, in between classes. We had, we thought, been shown the path which could make us good doctors *and* good humans, which could help us *find knowledge* and *practice an ethics*, side-by-side, in apposite compartments. We plunged headlong along that path, with exciting class lectures, hard-hitting stage plays, inspiring political slogans ... and good grades.

Somewhere along the way, however, the exercise turned traumatic, as we found questions from the familiar world of politics often interrupting our rigorous exercises in the equally familiar world of science. Some things about the ‘good doctor’ began to look increasingly embarrassing as we explored, perforce, those interruptions, often beginning in the clinic, but not always ending or

contained there. The ‘good doctor’ always knew. The good patient never did, and never asked. That changed, in a while, to the ‘good doctor’ who always knew, and always told the patient what she ‘needed to know’. The ‘good doctor’ always maintained a critical engagement between the text and his clinical experience, but the experience was his. The patient continued to be experienced, but in pain, not in knowledge. For Knowledge could be born not of pain, but of the observation of pain. And so on.

Faced with these and other interruptions, we took refuge, for a while, in an indifference bordering on antagonism toward one or the other of those worlds; we became either ‘good doctors’ *or* ‘persistently political’, having abandoned the ‘and’, as also the old pair of terms. For some of us, knowledge became the power to act, to heal, to ‘make human’ and whole she who was ill. For some, knowledge seemed poised to debar entry into the ethical, the human. For both constituencies, at this point, the ethical was the essence of the political, while the epistemological could stand aloof, unmarred. As for the human, both worlds were claiming, at different points and in different ways, this category for their own.

At this point, several of our journeys split. We, who had been looking in the same direction together, found ourselves turning outside from the tight circle. We, the ‘persistently political’, lost quite a few friends to good medicine.

The moments of our refuge-taking in persistent politics, however, were moments spent in dappled shade, and as we now looked up, we began to see the breaks in the canopy. Was this the beginning of the death of an utopia, we asked ourselves? The shade-giving tree that was beginning to give way? As the familiar began to look increasingly strange, however, and as we looked up to see what we *could not have seen looking down*, we set to work on what was made possible through that gift of vision; we realized that the field of the ‘political’ would have to be, to be useful, *on the move* in a constant act of interpretation, a constant exercise of making strange. The political would not be, could not be, the place of refuge; rather, it would cut

more and more, Frankenstein-like, into *both the dominant register of science and the conventional register of politics*. It would demand work both of the ‘good doctor’ we had left behind *and* that shady canopy within which we had named our resistances, until both had morphed into shapes completely unfamiliar.

As we, each and many, looked up at the interstices in the canopy, we saw a world of possibilities, and it was as though we had suddenly hit upon the problem with the “science ‘or’ politics” formula we had proposed earlier, as also of our discomforts with both the worlds we had occupied. For one, we were speaking from *somewhere* – a model of attachment. This was against the detached propositional model implicated in our familiar worlds; a model of KNOWER → known where the knower – be it activist or scientist – remained removed from, and un-implicated, in the contexts of the known. But would this be one that starts, and ends, with the embodied insider of the homogenous scientific or political world? Speaking with[in] and for itself, a complete closed community? That impulse we had seen already in the familiar political world, in the category formations of sexual minorities’ movements, caste politics, women, or the subaltern. That impulse had failed to satisfy us, because the model of attachment, as we began to see it, has one other important requirement, namely, it must retain fidelity to context. Here context is not [only] about date-time-place, it is most importantly about relationality; the space between you and me, both intra-community and inter-community. Once we took cognizance of this, we realized that space does many things. It induces a porosity of boundaries [of body, community], disallowing soliloquous discourses. It creates attachment. It also creates separation – *a turning from within outward* of a story-teller hitherto alongside another in the same space, hitherto completing one circle with a common centre.

This separation is not about bitter divorce, but about the difficult and courageous act of acknowledging difference.

We would therefore have to talk of building a story from perspective, a turning from within outward [from attachment to

separation], where perspective is the place from which we could *see differently*. It is important to remember here that we are not talking about perspective as individual taste or identity, but *a moment of seeing that can be lost in the looking*. A standpoint, then, is the act of interpretation of this turn, one that would have to be done each time in the act of building this story, and one that would constantly defy the fixing, the in-vitroism, which we had employed hitherto. Doing politics, then, also meant different journeys, taking note of those differences, and the work of *articulating those separations* rather than occupying them in self-righteous bitterness.

In the work we began of putting together stories, then, we also turned back to re-examine the place from which we were looking. For one, we began to see, through our model of attachment, that the erudite doctor or the sensitive clinician – that is, the good human – was not going to be the critical answer to the hegemony of western scientific knowledge in the spaces we had left behind. As students of science, we had embarked on a path of critique which needless to mention was like walking against the tide on a full moon night. We could not become ‘good doctors’, so we had tried becoming good critics. While the first friends we lost remained critical of our unscientific, almost renegade endeavors, we continued with our critiques. Written already on our pages, of course, were the available critiques of western science – critiques that had mostly prescribed either soliloquy or humanism as remedies to the masculinist western scientific. This impulse continued to pervade the most available meta-critical space, that of Marxism, in its orthodox and reflexive challenges to the dominant. So we carried on ... till we arrived on the shores of feminism. We took a well-deserved break. It was time to look inwards, we had decided. By this time we had also realized that criticality is not something that assumes the grand proportions of a hunting safari. Criticality is the name of the pebble we use to open up what lies by our feet – the mundane and granted shells of practices and norms. So we turned our attention *from the grand normal to the ordinary*, having sensed, also, that while the hegemonic had, on the one hand,

trivialized the everyday, the everyday, in the shape of the *normal*, had nevertheless remained the single most powerful site for the operations of the hegemonic.

While we lost a few friends we made new ones. Feminism provided us with the tools with which to chip slowly but surely away at the different walls that contained and confined us. Gender became the critical category of analysis for us. Suffused as we were in the hegemonic language of western scientificity, though, we found it difficult to shed our skins completely. So each of us inhabited the interstices of science, though in our own ways. Whether it be psychiatry, psychoanalysis or obstetrical knowledge production, each of us continued our engagement with science, but this time from a feminist perspective. Meanwhile we dreamed of a political space outside the usual. We dreamed of a movement in/of thought. We grouped together ... some of us, and named ourselves *Sanhati*. Ever unhappy with the “whens” and “wheres”, we began asking the “hows” and “whys”. This brought us to questions of epistemology, to questions of how and why a certain knowledge is produced in a particular way. We further moved from “How do we know?” to questions that reflect the locations of science within society and the relationship between power and knowledge. “Why do we know what we know?” “Why don’t we know what we don’t know?” “Who benefits or is disadvantaged from what we know?” “Who benefits or is disadvantaged from what we don’t know?” “Why is science practiced in the way that it is and who is advantaged or disadvantaged by this approach?” “How might the practice of science be different?” (Tuana, 1997: 17). These questions now formed the basis of our activism. The changed frame of questioning also entailed a shift in our political stance. We moved from a politics of ‘isms’, to a politics of standpoint. Needless to say, that move has been fractured, and is still regularly buffeted by, the winds of the unexpected, the winds of contingency.

While inhabiting the different spaces of activism in the diverse spaces of mental health, gender, sexuality, and class, we learnt to become dissatisfied with the given answers and the questions only

increased. Our association with *Sappho For Equality* helped foreground the question of sexuality in a more urgent way than ever before. The association that started with one of us volunteering as therapist threw open several uncomfortable questions regarding the knowledge and practice of science. We were forced to give up our clinical aprons and don the bandana of the activist. Trying to work our way through the maze of science, we came face to face with the activist question of claiming rights. Initially, in that space and for that politics, rights seemed right, in a way that the ‘critique of rights discourse’ had not explained, and we joined voices with the rest in demanding Human rights for all sexually marginalized people. The right to live, to work, to form groups, to form partnerships ... to buy common property ... to marry ... to have a family ... the list was never ending. But then we realized that there was something wrong about rights. Identity politics inheres in itself the impulse of happy amalgamation, co-habitation at best. The language of rights and identity politics did not question the security of the Order, it only aspired inclusion into that order and aimed at power sharing. It did not attempt any radical transformation, let alone re-examination. The present political scenario where each constituency hopes and struggles to bite off its share of the cake only exposed the hegemony of the structure.

We needed to formulate our demands differently. The need to enmesh gender and sexuality in a critical embrace once again brought us face to face with the need to understand and activate a standpoint politics. We are still at it. *Foreclosures* (i.e. the *repudiations of fundamental signifiers*) and ‘politically salient exclusions’ by the hegemonic that author our political practice in a particular manner needed to be exposed. This monograph is just one offshoot of that engagement and there are more to come, we promise.

In starting this series as an exercise in story-telling that will be very different from the conventional histories we have of ourselves and our politics, *Sanhati* has a hope, an ambition. That is to change the face of *literature in the Marxist space*. Marxism is/ has been, a space of learning for us. It is not, however, a space that is a ‘has

been' for us. In today's expanding world of contingent negotiations and little battles, where every woman is agent and every person a chooser, an 'ism' is at best an anachronism, at worst a nuisance. In our attempt to rewrite the familiar world of the political, we too have realized that old 'isms' cannot provide the answer. In response, we, the persistently political, have changed our vocabularies as fast as we could, adopting an intuitive politics of contingency, building on a knowledge and an ethics always already *possessed* by the 'excluded', as it were – a radical pastoral philosophy. It has not been difficult to do so. But seeing, as we can, from below what cannot be seen from above, seeing that we see from different heights and that a happy horizontality does not exist, we have realized that a *turn* to and faithful description of marginal locations, experience and micro-politics will not work. *What could work is a return – from the perspective of the excluded as resource – not authentic or originary, but appropriate.* What could possibly work is *an attention to possession<sup>1</sup> as momentary cognizance, a momentary gift of ab-normal vision that could help describe the dominant in terms different than its own, as also point to other possibilities.* The very notion of *standpoint* would then be *the act of interpretation that puts this positioning, this transient possession, to work;* not the interpretation of a place already defined. The Marxist space *is* the space where we hope to perform this interpretation, as well as articulate such a relationship between the ethico-politics of the 'below' and a knowledge that may begin there, but only begin. This is the space, then, of movement, a space of the (im)possible.

Which is why we will not call this series a 'feminism series', or a 'gender series', or a 'sexuality series'. The content that will populate this series will not be that clearly classifiable. This series is about raising the right questions in spaces hitherto unhinged from them, about talking of interruptions, but also about putting to work fantastic perspectives rather than merely describing them. This is what we mean when we make our confession – we wish to change the face

of literature in the Marxist space. We wish to shift from a time of 'isms' to a time of standpoint philosophies.

The reader might wonder as to why this piece which begins with the promise to examine the social reality in a more "local" context in a historico-geographical sense of the local, gradually meanders into a more international frame of reference. One might question the relevance of a text so steeped in a 'foreign' context. But our concern here was not to mark out any circumscribed space of pure pristine engagement. This monograph tries to look at the concepts that remain critically imbricated in our life-worlds. The idea is to mark their presence in order to come to a better understanding. Further, a concept, any concept, as any theory, "travels" (John 1997). Let this attempt be a step toward looking at theories and concepts in context, in order to be able to better, at a later date, chart the *parting* of ways (not an original separation) between concepts *as they travel* across geographical boundaries, and their trajectories in the 'originary' space.

We hope to take this work further at a later date by doing just this.

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<sup>1</sup> Possession here in the sense of a haunting, as against rightful ownership.

## LESBIAN STANDPOINT

### Exordium

A news report – a tiny three-liner, almost invisible to the uninitiated uninformed and uninterested – squeezed in between the more significant readable stuff, informs us of a twin suicide in one of the districts of our state, West Bengal. One has to tolerate it like the commercial breaks that disrupt the tempo of your more pleasurable pastime – consuming info-bytes about this country we live in. But commercial breaks are touted as significant – more so now-a-days as they purportedly give us valuable information about how healthy our child's toothpaste is, how liberating the new fairness cream is, and how respect comes easily when you own a big car. Yes, these news bits also, are meant to serve the function of journalistic responsibility, of informing the 'ignorant' mass that lesbians exist, that they exist in great despair, such that in the end they do not exist any more!

Let us take the 'information break'. Two women living in the Bhandarpur tea gardens of Jalpaiguri committed suicide on September 13, 2004. Aged eighteen and twenty-one, they apparently exchanged garlands and marriage vows in the temple behind which their bodies were discovered holding hands in death. A private Bengali television channel had done their homework better. They informed us (rather pathetically) that the two girls had left behind a suicide note clearly stating their reasons for such a gruesome decision. It appeared that the inability to live their lives *together* under adverse societal pressure had prompted them to end their lives together. For some of us, this was the first reported case of suicide by any lesbian couple in West Bengal, but definitely not the last, as over the last few years more incidents came to be reported that bear testimony to the rampant homophobia in our society.

*Sappho*, an emotional support group for lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women in eastern India was at a loss. They fervently wished they had established contact with these girls; perhaps that could have pre-empted their decision ... perhaps ... one can never be sure. Their immediate impulse was to get a more comprehensive account of the event ... to go there and silently live the sorrow of two lives lost ... to express solidarity (even if in death) with two sisters ... to come back with a learning that would help them articulate a language of resistance ... to evolve a method to prevent such fatalities. They had to desist from all or any of these impulses, as they feared exposure and further backlash, especially given the air of hatred that permeated the area following the incident. The above incident brings a foreboding of the daily perils lived by members of any marginalized group, perils more active if they embody a non-(re)productive, non-heterosexual, non-familial/non-familiar way of life.

While mainstream society easily brands homosexuality 'abnormal' ... unviable, one finds the medical fraternity little more acquiescent now ... cautious perhaps. Homosexuality is no longer proclaimed abnormal, at least in official scientific and medical texts. Psychiatry refers to it as an "*alternative* life-style", occurring "with some regularity as a *variant* of human sexuality" (Kaplan and Sadock, 1994:658) [emphasis added]. Any 'medically correct' member of the medical fraternity – Psychiatry or otherwise – knows better than to label homosexuality as pathological. They would at best refer to it as "*non-conventional*".<sup>1</sup>

One could ask then: what is the conventional? How does the

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<sup>1</sup> Since this monograph will speak a great deal and in some detail about scientific knowledge and the practice of science, it would be appropriate to state at the outset that we are not talking about conspiracy theories here, about ancient nexuses between 'evil' scientific practitioners and an 'evil' society. The answers, therefore, will not come in the shape of 'good', chivalrous doctors; the chivalrous stands of [medical] science are as much part of the em[brace] of science and its normative constructions as the 'bad' ones, as we hope to show.

specter of conventionality loom large over our beings? Do the *purportedly* ‘normal’, the ‘conventional’, the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘dominant’ have a life of their own; are they natural, self-evident, pre-ordained and therefore beyond contestation, beyond signifiatory re-articulation? Or can these categories that come to rule our lives, our beings and our desires, be seen to be constituted, brought into existence through a process that itself remains obscure and invisible? How do these near-normative categories that rule our lives, that produce and reproduce our life-worlds, find sedimentation; how do they get naturalized? What are the processes of materialization? Are there, in these processes of materialization *fundamental repudiations*, or perhaps *repudiations of fundamental signifiers*? Do such fundamental repudiations produce regimentations that order a polymorphosity of myriad (sexual) behaviors-choices-attitudes-mores-moments into neat, bounded, tightly categorized packages of ‘conventions’ and ‘exceptions’? Moreover, what is the significance of bringing to surface the fact that our sexuality is constructed, that our (sexual) subjectivities are always “works-in-progress”? How does this insight enable the sexual rights movement? How does it enable the feminist movement?

The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movement in India, as elsewhere, has charted its struggle against ‘mainstream’ discrimination along three main axes: non-pathologization of sexual preference; recognition of human rights and a third area where there has been a disjuncture. While the male homosexual community has primarily concentrated on the Anti-AIDS Discrimination Campaign, the lesbian community has worked in close sisterhood with the feminist movement. The gay rights movement has worked to demystify popular linkages between sexual pleasure and the disease-danger-death continuum through their campaign against AIDS discrimination, and the repeal/reform of section 377 of the IPC<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, the

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<sup>2</sup> Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code states that whosoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life or 10 years. The Union

lesbian rights movement has charted its struggle through a mapping of significant overlaps with gender oppression.

**The enigmatic (em)brace of science: shifting sands, chivalrous stands.**

The relationship between medical science and the sexuality rights movement has been a tense and ambivalent one. The LGBT movement has, on several occasions, raised its voice against science’s authoritarian construction of “deviant” bodies, minds and psyches through the category of *perversion*. Perceiving such an exercise to be a ruse for scientific and social control over diverse sexual behaviors, the gay community has fought a stiff battle to remove homosexuality as a pathological category from the diagnostic manuals used in psychiatric clinics all over the world. At other times they have willingly fallen back on scientific studies and experimental projects in an attempt to earn scientific authenticity and therefore greater social acceptability for their sexual behavior. ‘Homosexuals’ have lent their bodies, minds and beings to the scientific gaze in the hope of securing a self-knowledge that would give them the security of an identity, a difference and a justification for assimilation into the ‘mainstream’. Biological

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Government of India in response to a petition filed by the Naz Foundation (India) Trust before the Delhi High Court in 2001, made its position clear. Drawing upon familiar notions of “Indian morality” and “public sentiment”, the state decreed that section 377 could not be reformed as “Indian society by and large disapproves of homosexuality”! Justifying its stand, the state argued that the purpose of section 377 of IPC was to provide a healthy environment in the society by criminalizing “unnatural sexual activities” and yielding to such changes in law could instead open the flood gates of “delinquent behavior”. Petitions like these, the affidavit responded, could jeopardize the delivery of justice in incidents of child sexual abuse and rape – crimes that are supposedly covered under this law.

This argument of course overlooks the fact that the petition appeals for decriminalization of consensual, private, adult sexual behavior and does not prevent its use in child sexual abuse or to fill lacunae in rape cases, as claimed by the state.

evidence for homosexuality has often served as the ground for political activism among the *alternative sexuality* groups, for instance in campaigns directed towards the eradication of prejudice. Articulating the power of science<sup>3</sup> in the making and breaking of the homosexual, Jennifer Terry writes:

We, as deviant subjects, have had to account for ourselves as anomalies. We are compelled to ask certain *questions of the self*, beyond the generic question of “Who am I?” In addition we ask “how did I come to be this way?” “How and why am I different?” “Is there something wrong with me?” “Is there something in my background that would explain my homosexuality?” “Is there something different about my body?” “Am I a danger to myself or others?” Deviant subjectivity is forged in the relay of these questions, where a number of intended and unintended effects are produced. (1995: 137-138)

Starting from the late nineteenth century, ‘deviant’ sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular has occupied the relentless attention of clinicians and scientists as an object of investigation in the West. Scientific inquiry into homosexuality has, from time to time, thrown up several “truths” about its causes and consequences. Around the nineteenth century a new psychiatric style of reasoning about

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<sup>3</sup> What do we mean by the ‘power of science’? The power of science is also the power of the hegemonic; the power of the hegemonic lies in the power of science. In our world – the world of the present – the ‘modern’ world – the hegemonic (whether Global Capitalist or White Racist, Patriarchal-Androcentric or Heterosexual, or High Hindu Brahminical) seeks constant validation largely in the naturalized authority of science. While the hegemonic tries to explain catastrophes like nuclear explosions as “aberrations” or “historical blunders” of a few power-hungry scientists (never a case of ‘good science’), the omnipotence of science ... ‘good science’ ... as the initiator and sustainer of life is kept unquestioned through several ongoing scientific projects, the two most prestigious being the Human Genome Project and the campaign for Global AIDS Prevention.

diseases emerged in the west – one that made possible among other things a ‘science of sexuality’. For one, this emerging discipline made (normal) sexuality the crux and core of our identities. Two, it sought to classify and categorize every little departure from the ‘normal sexual instinct’. What was hitherto ‘same-sex contact’ or ‘homosexual behavior’ became ‘homosexual identity’ – a specific attribute of a group of ‘perverts’ whose entire subjectivity and *raison de e`tre came to be defined by and through their deviant sexuality*. Thereafter every ‘perversion’ (homosexuality, masochism, sadism and fetishism) came to be looked upon as specificities that characterized and constituted each (sexed) self. Thus the homosexual (as) pervert was born. Being classified as a pervert could alter anything from one’s self-image to one’s behavior to one’s social circumstances. And this was the effect of specific historical conditions<sup>4</sup>. By the end of the 19th century when medicine and psychiatry were effectively competing with religion and law for jurisdiction over sexuality, the discourse around homosexuality expanded from the realm of sin and crime to that of pathology. It came to be argued that homosexuality is not a sin or a crime for which a person is responsible and should be punished, but a “mental illness or personality disorder” that should be cured. It fell upon the scientific community to find answers – to (re)search the etiological basis of such deviant behavior and accordingly fix the methods of restoring the ill to health.

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault’s (1978; 1985) and Arnold Davidson’s (2001) works are important to further one’s understanding of how homosexuality came to acquire its position as a ‘perversion’ with its definitive quality of accounting for one’s personality – one’s existence. Foucault’s genealogy of the *sexed* subject in the West investigates the origin of new categories of the *sexed* self. He shows how one’s sexual desire and its acting out came to bear the “truth” of one’s very subject-hood. Davidson shows how psychiatry came to provide a fertile ground for new conceptualizations of the self. His work demonstrates how the concept of perversion, once exclusively a part of specialized nineteenth century discussions, became in the twentieth century, a dominant way of organizing our thoughts about our own sexuality.

In 1886, noted sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing listed homosexuality along with 200 other case studies of deviant sexual practices in his definitive work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Krafft-Ebing's work was part of a pre-sexological era of modern sex research devoted almost exclusively to the study of people believed to be sick. The sexual manifestations of their sickness were carefully listed and, as a rule, ascribed to degeneration.<sup>5</sup> While Krafft-Ebing dismissed homosexuality as a degenerative disease, Havelock Ellis in his book, *Sexual Inversion* wrote about homosexuality as a harmless deviation from the norm. Ellis was among the first to actually put forth a theory on homosexuality. *Sexual Inversion*, written in 1897 represented homosexuality (better known then as inversion) as inborn and therefore not pathological.<sup>6</sup>

Perversion as a possible way of being, a possible category of the self, is the legacy of nineteenth century scientific theories. All of our subsequent reasoning about perversion is suffused by the historical understandings of the concept. Even those of us who find solace in the belief that we are not full-fledged perverts have to scrutinize ourselves every living moment; every little deviation of the 'sexual instinct' could be seen as a sign of our impending perversion. The archaeology of perversion is therefore a crucial step in understanding

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<sup>5</sup> According to Krafft-Ebing, inborn same-sex desire comes from a feminine tendency in a man, or a masculine tendency in a woman.

<sup>6</sup> The modern concept of sexology came with Iwan Bloch, considered the father of sexology, whose work showed that the degeneracy theory of sexual behavior propagated by medical science was insufficiently informed and needed to be expanded by historical and anthropological inputs.

Alfred Kinsey's study on sexuality gave a new life to homosexuality as it went on to show that the practice of homosexuality was not restricted to just a few social deviants, rather, besides self-identified homosexuals, various forms of same-sex behavior was a prevalent practice among many adult Americans who experienced same-sex behavior or fantasies at some time of their lives. The Kinsey reports of 1948 and 1953 are regarded by many to have contributed to the sexual revolution of the sixties.

the history of the contemporary self – a self that is both normally sexed and sexual in a normal sense.

The late nineteenth century interest in sexology, however, was overshadowed by the early twentieth century fascination with psychology. In this respect it needs to be mentioned that psychoanalysis is perhaps the only moment (or perhaps the *hinge a la Derrida*) in the history of the mental health sciences that tried to set up a dialogue with perversion and homosexuality, that offered perversion and homosexuality a possibility, a possible recognition as not altogether pathological. In the early years of the twentieth century, with the advent of psychoanalysis, perversion is said to have found a new significance, as playing an important and constitutive role in the human psyche. Freud did not consider same-sex desire to be pathological in any way, rather, at a historical moment when everyone around him was talking about homosexuality in evolutionary or racial terms, Freud insisted that same-sex desire was a universal human potential, thereby resisting all attempts to separate homosexuals from the rest of the population as a special group defined by its deviant character.

Nonetheless, non-heterosexual activists have not found it easy to ally in general with psychoanalysis, given its normativizing therapeutic impulse and practice,<sup>7</sup> and certain reductionist oversimplified accounts of diverse sexual conduct offered by psychoanalytic accounts (Rubin, 1994:78; Dean and Lane, 2001:9). While psychoanalytic accounts have tried to steer clear of biologism, they feel the need to rely on notions of pre-social drives to explain *normal* heterosexual gender role development and such theories are necessarily premised on a mandatory disavowal of homosexual attachment. This line of thinking

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<sup>7</sup> For a further discussion on the tensions between the institution and the concepts of psychoanalysis regarding homosexuality, see "Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis: An Introduction" in Tim Dean and Christopher Lane ed. *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, 2001.

has precluded any positive view of lesbian and gay sexualities within the discipline of psychoanalysis.<sup>8</sup>

But the moment of a possible dialogue – dialogue in a non-pathological sense that homosexuality enjoyed in the first half of the twentieth century, at least within the realm of Freudian psychoanalysis – was short-lived, as the mental health sciences eventually came to be dominated by behaviorism and the bio-medical model of psychiatry. The psychiatric institution treated homosexuality as a perversion and advocated different treatment techniques such as aversion therapy, behavior conditioning etc.

It was largely against the legacy of such scientific-medical categories of perversion that the lesbian-gay movements in the West built their agitation since the late sixties.<sup>9</sup> They made de-pathologization a rallying cry around which much of the political activism gathered momentum. It was argued that reported incidents of a greater frequency of psychiatric disorder in people with same-sex behavior were more a response to adverse social reactions than any inherent pathological predisposition believed to reside in people with same-sex preferences. The attempt was to establish the fact that homosexuality was not a mental illness, as also that mental illness did not occur more among the homosexual population. Thus the easy reciprocity between homosexuality and (mental) disorder (homosexuality meaning

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<sup>8</sup> More recently efforts have been made by feminists (Lauretis, 1994; Butler, 1997) to read and reread Freud more constructively especially in the context of lesbianism by arguing that “self-definition, self-representation, and personal and political identity are not only grounded in the sphere of the sexual, but actually constituted in relation to a *sexual* difference from socially dominant, institutionalized, heterosexual forms” (Lauretis, 1994:xii).

<sup>9</sup> The Gay-Lesbian movement in India grew out of a different starting point. Though sexual identities have remained interpellated by the call of the hegemonic scientific institutions as well here, gay-lesbian activism has taken shape largely in the shadows of the AIDS epidemic threat as also in response to certain cinematic representations of sexuality in contemporary times, the movie *Fire* being foremost among them.

mental illness and mental illness signifying homosexuality) was challenged.

In 1973, some dissenting voices within the psychiatric fraternity argued successfully to get the category of Homosexuality deleted from the diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association.<sup>10</sup> This was possible due to a combination of factors such as, empirical data that showed “no statistically significant difference” in the mental health of the homosexual and the heterosexual population and a politically active gay community that was successful in forcing the issue of homosexuality into the social limelight. It was only in May 1990, that the General Assembly of the World Health Organization (WHO) removed homosexuality from their list of mental disorders.

Recent scientific trends have, however, sought to re-establish the link between homosexuality and mental disorder invalidating previous attempts to the contrary. A study (Sandfort et al.) recently published in the Archives of General Psychiatry 58:85-91 is said to have confirmed the findings of two previous studies (Herrell 1999 & Fergusson 1999) that show the presence of higher rates of psychiatric disorders among homosexually oriented men and women than among the heterosexual population. The last study’s significance lay in the fact that it was carried out in Netherlands, where social acceptance

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<sup>10</sup> The debate over whether homosexuality could be included as a mental disorder in the diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association was reflective of a crucial shift in the psychiatric deliberations at that time: *consequence* and not *cause* should be central to the definition of mental disorder. So homosexuality could not be considered inherently pathological and therefore a mental disorder. The creation of a new category Sexual Orientation Disturbance in 1973 for those “disturbed by, in conflict with, or wish to change their sexual orientation” marked the disappearance of the disorder homosexuality from the manual. It was renamed Ego-dystonic Homosexuality in DSM-III in 1980. Ego-dystonic Homosexuality was removed entirely from DSM-III-R (1987) following the criticism that linking homosexuality with pathology was not desirable as almost all homosexually oriented people go through an ego-dystonic phase and that this could be reflective of the social prejudice that they are bound to encounter.

of same-sex behavior is said to be high. The results were thus put into service to question the assumption that social or internalized homophobia is the sole reason for the high rate of psychiatric problems among same-sex people. “The findings,” say the authors, “support the assumption that people with same-sex sexual behavior are at greater risk for psychiatric disorders.”

The intent of these and similar studies clearly seems to be to re-establish same-sex behavior as a risk factor in the causation of psychiatric problems. Once again an effort to delineate a clinical boundary between homosexual and (*normal*) heterosexual people is gathering force. According to the authors of this study, “... applying a more rigorous methodology”, there is “substantial support” for the idea that gay men and lesbians are, indeed, less psychologically healthy than heterosexuals. The differences observed in mental health, the Sandfort report suggests, may be due to “biological and genetic factors in the causes and development of homosexuality which predispose homosexual people to developing psychiatric disorders.” These kinds of studies along with those that try to locate the gay gene suggest that if homosexual orientation is established as biologically influenced in human individuals, then it can also be assumed to represent a “biological developmental error”, ultimately giving rise to various forms of ill health.

The lesbian, gay and transgender movements have relied heavily on scientific tenets to formulate their activism (both in demanding its support as well as in dismissing its homophobic claims). The movements, in a bid to find legitimacy for sexual preference, have at times made science their ally. Sometimes their arguments have emanated from the premise that homosexuality is genetic or innate, therefore irreversible and not to be “cured” away. This claim of intrinsic quality has been used to counter theories that tried to prove that homosexual behaviors could be eliminated and that some individuals could experience a change in sexual orientation, from predominantly homosexual to predominantly heterosexual, with competent therapy. Studies that suggested that homosexual orientation could be modified

were dismissed by researchers’ discovery of some fifty-four genes related to sexual differentiation. Such results found takers among the gay community and added weight to their claim that homosexuality, lesbianism, and transgenderism are literally part-and-parcel of one’s system, and thus inborn and unchangeable. But later on, the gene hypothesis lost its use in this space as it was argued that even if homosexuality was found to have a genetic basis, the mental/physical health consequences would still be present and needed to be addressed. Thus the genetic basis was forwarded as a criterion for showing that homosexuality could be considered an aberration, or at least not as natural as heterosexuality.

Another line of argument contends that since same-sex behavior is observable in animals and animal behavior is determined by their instincts, homosexuality is in accordance with animal nature in particular, and with nature or the natural order in general. Since man is also animal, homosexuality must also be in accordance with human nature. But the animal hypothesis of homosexuality has been countered by arguing that there are certain other activities also observable in animals, like killing of one’s young or devouring of other animals. Can we then conclude that these, by virtue of being part of the behavioral repertoire of animals, are natural in humans and should be considered part of human nature as well? Therefore even if homosexual instinct is observed in animals it cannot be extrapolated as natural in the space of the human. Rather, animal homosexuality, filicide and ‘cannibalism’ are better considered exceptions to normal animal behavior. Moreover it “is poor science to ‘read’ human motivations and sentiments into animal behavior”; human beings by virtue of their rational and moral quality cannot be bracketed with *irrational* animal behavior. The argument goes further to point out that human nature goes beyond the jurisdiction of science, into philosophy, and unlike animals, human beings need to define themselves as ethical and moral beings alongside (and sometimes in contradiction to, why not?) objects of nature<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> This line of argument appeared in an article “The Animal Homosexuality Myth” by Luiz Sérgio Solimeo adapted from the author’s recently published

Bio-medical theories have time and again tried to explain homosexual behavior in terms of ‘masculinised’ uteri, ‘feminized’ testes, female hormone (to explain male homosexuality) and male hormone (to explain female homosexuality) excesses and chromosomal weaknesses. Similarly, psychoanalytic accounts of excessive same-sex parent attachment and opposite-sex parent rejection suggesting faulty gender role development have been in circulation for long. In other words, a presumed disjunction or gap between normatively understood gender roles with their accompanying sexual desires, and the sexual behavior exhibited by individuals, has animated most of the scientific and clinical exercises attempting to understand homosexuality.

Whatever the scientific stand on the issue of homosexuality (and research efforts in this field have been very intense), the medical community in general has been rather tardy in adopting homosexuality as a form of non-pathological sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Although homosexuality has been erased from the official list of disorders, in India there has been a dearth of debates, discussions, sensitization and awareness campaigns among health professionals, and no active role taken up by the psychiatric community to dispel fears and misconceptions in the larger society. Either professionals have demonstrated ignorance about the removal of the clinical category of homosexuality from the list of disorders, or have perpetuated social stigmatization by continuing to

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book, *Defending a Higher Law: Why We Must Resist Same Sex “Marriage” and the Homosexual Movement*. The article excerpt was floated on the Internet.

<sup>12</sup> Public health is another arena where homosexuality and sexuality in general lie skin-to-skin with disease. Conceptualized in narrow biomedical terms, and translated along the lines of “who does what, with whom, when, how, and how many times”, population control studies and policies and the AIDS prevention campaign have generated a renewed interest in sexuality and subjected it to constant scrutiny. The discourse of Public Health re-instates the medical professional as the moral arbiter once again, reducing health to morality. Not only does the body get converted through various social controls into paradoxical meanings of potent/impotent, virile/docile, healthy/dangerous, moral/immoral, the omnipresent gaze of Public Health instills in us a sense of mass homophobia.

practice aversion therapy, behavior-cognitive therapy and other normalizing procedures in a bid to bring ‘sexual deviants’ back to the mainstream.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, the psychiatrization of homosexuality persists even *after* its de-pathologization, albeit in a displaced form. The same textbooks that carry homosexuality in a chapter on normal sexuality describe a pathological condition named Gender Identity Disorder.<sup>14</sup> Gender Identity Disorder and homosexuality can be shown to be very closely related in terms of social stigma, apprehended disabilities, distress and disadvantages. The inability to make sense of sexual desires that do not conform to conventionally understood gender attachments (heterosexuality as directly flowing from heteropolarity: there are two sexes – male and female – falling in love and desiring each other) prompt some with same-sex attraction to try and re-configure themselves as members of the other sex (if I am a woman and happen to desire a woman then I must actually be a man. So I start imagining and imaging myself as a member of the other sex). This desire to reconfigure and re-conform might well start from the need to transcend certain socio-cultural disadvantages but can grow into a self-absorbed identity, in and for itself, as it were. This then could be the story of at least some of the people presenting to the clinic with gender dysphoria and subsequently diagnosed as suffering from Gender Identity Disorder.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> There have been a few sensitive clinicians who have contributed to the effort of changing perceptions and societal attitudes but the general scientific community has been largely indifferent.

<sup>14</sup> Gender Identity Disorder was first introduced in DSM-III (1980) a few years after Homosexuality was removed from the diagnostic manual. Gender Identity Disorder is characterized by strong and persistent cross-gender identification (not merely a desire for any perceived cultural advantage of being the other sex) as well as a persistent discomfort with one’s sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex. The term *gender dysphoria* has been used to characterize a person’s sense of discomfort or unease about his or her status as male or female.

<sup>15</sup> Some, thereafter, are further unable to adapt completely to the reconfigured role either, often ending up wanting to change their sexual preference and return to a more (re)productive sexual economy.

Contemporary psychiatry, though *presenting* a more accommodative stance, then, nevertheless retains its normativizing function – a function that relates to the way the broader social functions. Echoing scientific caution, psychiatrists are quick to point out to their ‘patients’ and their guardians that homosexuality is indeed a non-pathological condition and a “common phenomenon seen among many adolescents.” Holding on to the rhetoric of non-pathology, they counsel parents not to treat their wards harshly or irresponsibly, assuring them about the *transitoriness* of the phenomenon<sup>16</sup>. The central thrust of contemporary ‘treatment’ modalities is to orient the concerned individuals about the social non-acceptance and (therefore) non-viability of such alternative sexual lifestyles<sup>17</sup>. What emerges, then, through an examination of such clinical discourses, is the continued psychiatrization of homosexuality and transgender people and psychiatry’s overwhelming propensity to govern human behavior into categories of what will or will not count as socially viable, a marking off in advance.

Thus science offers us a very slippery ground to imagine a politics based on identity. The problem lies not just in the bias of some mental health professionals who try to either cure or discourage homosexuality. The problem also lies perhaps in science’s inherent drive to find and fix meanings. The problem lies in the value-neutral and objective stance so easily associated with science. The problem lies in us – being infused with a scientific rationality. The search for answers and certitude that governs science’s theory and practice precludes any

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<sup>16</sup> This belief in homosexuality being a temporary phase capable of being transformed finds reflection in many suggestions on record: visit the disco more often, read more pornographic literature and practice skipping everyday!

<sup>17</sup> The contradiction that flows from the side of the therapist during a therapeutic session is symptomatic of the prejudice that is deeply embedded within our psyches and that refuses to be removed in spite of textbook learning or professional training. The constant disdain and indifference faced in the clinic has led to many taking refuge in the warmth of support groups which have offered a space of acceptance and strength to fight social stigma and the tyranny of heterosexism in a way, not offered by the clinic.

imaginings of a being that is neither precise nor fluid, neither normal nor pathological. Even as it purports to only describe what is already present, driven by the basic principle of fixing meanings and finding truth, science strives to reach the core – reach the three-dimensional tissue space in clinical anatomy, reach the hormone, the chromosome, the gene or the atom. The homosexual even if not defined in pathological terms will *still* have to be defined – defined in terms of its cellular structure, its atomic configuration and only then can it devise a politics of rights – be it human rights or even ‘genetic rights’. The polymorphosity of sexualities, their choreographers, the complex sensualities of sexual desire, the infinite vitality of sexed lives will have to be mapped and deciphered within the scientific domain.

Interestingly, faced with the critique of being rigid, static, premeditated and unequivocal, science has bounced back with the promise of a dynamic, reflexive ever-changing look – living-and-always-already-alive tenets. Science has now contended that its critics tend to read its doctrines *out of context* and therefore their oppositions are baseless. Science is not always a tool of category formation and truth-claims. The fact that homosexuality has been decreed non-pathological bears proof of this purportedly accommodative stance of science. But even with such counter-claims there can perhaps be no doubt that science remains to this day streaked with a classificatory-diagnostic-definitional impulse. The belief systems governing the sciences have not changed much since the seventeenth century even though the language of science might show a more inclusive syntax.

We end this section with two anecdotes. Both anecdotes show how the normative frame works. The first shows how the purportedly ‘lay’ gets caught in the normative frame; the second shows how even science at times gets caught in the normative frame. The second raises an important question: do we need to come out of our ‘scientific skin’, of the *given* ‘scientific skin’, if we want to build a politics of resistance, build resistance against the organized and hegemonic workings of heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia. Nothing short of a *queering* of science can take us anywhere near it.

- In a class on sexual disorders, having made my point that any academic discussion on sexual disorders needs to be re-formulated in terms of discussing one's sexuality rather than its deviancies, I elaborately discussed homosexuality and its growing awareness as a non-pathological form of sexual desire along with heterosexuality. One counselor-student who seemed quite open to new ideas throughout the class had a question, "What do you think could be the environmental causal factors giving rise to such behavior when in a family of two daughters brought up in a similar fashion, one becomes a homosexual and the other does not?" And yet again another queried, "Do you think they can marry ever?" to which another immediately prompted helpfully, "May be they can after they have recovered"!
- A young apparently unmarried woman visited the gynecologist on missing her periods for two consecutive months. The doctor after a brief history taking asked her very secretively if she had an "active sexual life". Surprised at the question, she nevertheless answered in the affirmative. At this, the young male doctor very succinctly advised her to undergo a pregnancy test as the first imperative before proceeding any further with treatment. The woman insisted that a pregnancy test would not be necessary in her case. The doctor was rather cross at his scientific expertise being challenged and refused outright to have anything more to do with the patient concerned. The woman left the clinic disappointed but before leaving she informed the doctor that she was in a lesbian relation and therefore did not think it necessary to undergo the pregnancy test.

### **The Rights And Wrongs Of Lesbians**

In an effort to challenge the overwhelmingly homophobic attitude in the society and thereby generate understanding and acceptance of non-heterosexual mores of life, the marginalized sexuality groups have

carried on a sustained campaign with the state. They have demanded legislative changes that will recognize their sexuality as non-criminal and ensure them the right to participate fully in the societal process without fear of discrimination on account of their sexual practice. The sexual rights movement is gaining strength everyday. Actively organizing mass awareness programmes, college sensitization interactions and public debates, activist groups are questioning the social mores and cultural stereotypes of gender roles and sexual practice that stifle individual expression of desire. As the sensitization campaigns build up and scientific literature make us more knowledgeable about our body and psyche, more and more people are beginning to believe that homosexuality is not a disease but "an individual choice". And we find support coming in a humanist garb. Human rights are considered indispensable for these "poor souls" who for some reason as yet unknown, have "decided to lead a different life than the *normal*". Even as we look quizzically at them trying to find some tell-tale signs of a *different* sexuality, a *different* sexual act, we heave a sigh of relief as we reaffirm to ourselves that we do not harbor any such difference (perversities?). While we support their appeal for the right to non-discrimination, we keep our fingers crossed and hope that our children and near and dear ones do not show any such tendencies.

How does the language of rights serve the present struggle for dignity and freedom envisaged by the gay-lesbian movement? What are its "perils and possibilities"? Quite a few social movements, feminist struggles in particular, have provided us with the insight that claiming justice through liberal legalism sets oneself up in confrontation with the State in a way that can often prove counterproductive. Some have even pointed out the possible de-politicization of such movements as the tardy legislative and juridical debates appropriate them and they get resituated in the terms and conditions of viability and constitutionality of anticipated rights. Writing on "suffering the paradox of rights", Wendy Brown argues, "If we are constrained to need and want rights do they inevitably shape as well as claim our desire without

gratifying it?” (2002:421). Yet, the necessity of rights has been heralded as providing “minimum conditions of individuation”, a necessary tool for “recognition and redistribution” and “that which we cannot not want”. Indeed the politics of recognition can function as an important means to *unveil politically salient exclusions* – exclusions operating under the normative garb of social taboos, prevalent conventions, cultural homogeneity, and traditional heritage. Mis-recognition and non-recognition can serve to naturalize the power held by the dominant over non-dominant modes of life. Indeed it is one of the ways that the dominant comes to occupy its dominant status – through the institution of omissions as also through the force of commissions – through forgetting as also through a forgetting of the forgotten – through disavowal as also through a disavowal of the disavowed. In this way, certain life forms get banished to the realm of the unacknowledged, the unspoken, the nonexistent. On the other hand, the inability to be recognized for what one is, can cause a lot of degradation in self-esteem<sup>18</sup> as also political paralysis<sup>19</sup>.

The political activism of the gay-lesbian movement takes off along two directions that are not necessarily parallel but converging – the human rights framework and identity politics. The demand to be recognized is premised at times on the understanding that whatever we may be in our personal and social lives, we are ultimately *human*

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<sup>18</sup> Depleted self-esteem and a sense of social un-productivity due to a politics of non-recognition is a recurrent theme in the narratives of most women with same-sex preference. Families, friends, teachers and colleagues refuse to recognize their sexual desire. This deliberate disavowal instills in some a feeling of pathological self-identification and they end up in the psychiatrist’s clinic with discomfort and confusion regarding their gender and sexual roles.

<sup>19</sup> There have been some debates worth taking note of, on the issue of political paralysis. For instance, Judith Butler would argue that bringing the subject to crisis does not necessarily mean an end to politics; rather, the secure notion of the subject *has* to be put under erasure to forge a feminist form of politics.

*beings*, a higher plane of existence grounded in certain shared virtues.<sup>20</sup> Most of the debates and activism that has constituted gay-lesbian politics has focused on the liberal agenda of doing away with discrimination and inclusion of all *other* sexualities within the mainstream. Therefore the terms of engagement have hovered around:

*Homosexuality is nothing abnormal, just another form of sexuality.*

*We are first humans and then women and lastly lesbians.*

*We claim human rights like the rest of you.*

The problems of making ‘human’ a political category are well acknowledged. The notion of the ‘human’ remains framed by a transcendental presence of being, a presence that seems to be completely unshackled from complex and contradictory positionings of class, caste, race, community, gender or sexuality. The problems of making a human core the basis of legal personhood then is that it cannot offer space to all forms of subjectivities – those who cannot belong to the human wholeness – for example the not-so-good humans or the sub-humans. The principles of the dominant structures – the upper class, upper caste, white, male citizen subjectivities inhere in the concept of the humanist hu(man). The subject of rights is inevitably a figure of coherent, legitimate citizen-sons who have mastered the language and method needed to represent self-interests, subjects endowed with rationality, scientific and political theories and a political consciousness. The lesbian is always already excluded from such negotiations as she is not-male, not-rational (by virtue of her sexuality), not-scientific (by virtue of her pathological sexuality) and not-political (by virtue of the illegal status of her pathological sexuality). Moreover,

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<sup>20</sup> There can be two strands in this form of reasoning. One, of inclusion within the fold on the basis of similar attributes (a principle of maximum commonness), and two, inclusion within the mainstream in spite of differences (minimum common principle).

while playing the role of de-pathologization as also of politicization, while grounding the issue of lesbianism within a political field, the trope of human rights can also erase the specificity of lesbian experience and suffering, an erasure that is a consequence of lesbianism being articulated in terms of such humanist universals. Thus relocating homosexuality and lesbianism in the arena of human rights – rights premised on the notion of a human – can serve to be a double-edged sword as lesbians might either not qualify as human enough, or, might stand the risk of losing their lesbian difference by becoming *too* human.

On the other hand identity politics is founded on the condition of being recognized *as* different<sup>21</sup> – as woman, as lesbian, as black. This claim to recognition, acknowledgement of what one *is*, is premised on the ability to define, to be able to claim a secure sense of self, a well-identifiable uniqueness. And this identity, this distinctiveness has to then emanate from an authenticity as also to constantly uphold it. One has to carry one's identity in a manner that reiterates its authenticity – its legitimacy to a unique identity that demands credit and respect for what it is. Authenticity in its turn can only be grounded in a quintessence – an original archetype. Therefore those who believe their identities necessarily determine a certain politics are necessarily compelled to discover the 'true' self, the true 'you' as bearer of this political identity. Whether inwardly (biologically) given or outwardly (socially) constructed, any politics of recognition based on identity as that of the gay-lesbian movement has to stake a claim to essence<sup>22</sup> –

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<sup>21</sup> This stake to difference, then, has to affirm its specificity on some shared quality within the community (sexuality for lesbians, historical oppression for blacks, social disadvantage for women). This necessity to define a politically active community tends to reify difference by not only essentializing and naturalizing but also by homogenizing, and in the process, erasing all possibilities of polymorphous contradictoriness.

<sup>22</sup> Adherence to some gay essence – be it the gay gene, gay pride, lesbian culture or gay sensibility – informs much of gay-lesbian activism today.

a decisive core (almost a spirit) that explains other existences but is itself beyond explanation.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, identity politics and the discourse of rights can become a veritable ploy for normativization as they function only to lessen or alleviate conditions of discrimination rather than challenging systems of subordination. Wendy Brown (2002: 423) contends, "The regulatory dimension of identity-based rights emerges to the extent that rights are never deployed "freely", but always within a discursive, hence normative context, precisely the context in which "woman" (and any other identity category) is iterated and reiterated". The more specific rights are made to address discrimination, the more likely they are to encode definitional rigidity. To claim rights as a homosexual is not to be outside its interpellative rigor, i.e. the designation as a 'homosexual' not only in law but also in the clinic, the media and the larger social arena. Thus a simple broadening of the ambit of the 'natural' by a pluralist incorporation of multiple identitarian differences does not serve to destabilize the secure a-historical near naturalized workings of the dominant Order;<sup>24</sup> rather, it justifies and reiterates the existence of the hegemonic Order.

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<sup>23</sup> But then what is the risk of essence? Feminists have lent to the space of theory some of the fiercest critiques of essentialist subject-hood. The authentic self-actualizing subject of politics has been problematized as a veritable fiction. The problems of imagining a secure definition of *what is a woman* and *who is a feminist* occupies the heart of contemporary feminist debates. Socio-cultural unity once imagined in terms of a 'we' grounded in a commonality of experiences be it biology or culture was thought to form the basis for women's solidarity – a global sisterhood also imbued with a political potential. But the realization that merely occupying a position of subordination does not empower one with political consciousness as also the fact that perceptions of oppression can be diverse and heterogeneous posed a challenge to this imagining of a ubiquitous unity based on identity.

<sup>24</sup> The politics of recognition is a compatible tool in a political environment of "multiculturalism and democratic accommodation of cultural diversity", says Cressida J. Heyes (2003: 53).

Perhaps the dominant (heterosexual) order so organizes our lives that any talk of other sexualities can only be envisaged in the form of a movement for minority rights – a movement aimed at inclusion and respectful tolerance of alternative lifestyles, identities. In this understanding, heterosexuals are called upon to acknowledge homosexuals and understand their lives – to give them space within the hegemonic. But never is the dominant order questioned. It is important to note, that against a backdrop of institutional primacy and legitimization of the middle class monogamous reproductive heterosexual economy, all forms of sexual behavior outside the heterosexual framework, in particular homosexuality, would emerge as deviant and marginal, at best variant. The hegemony of the Heterosexual Order functions through a securing of its boundaries. And to do so it has to create its *other*. Without a certain precipitation of the ‘deviant’, heterosexuality cannot posit itself as normal; without this image of a copy-gone-bad, heterosexuality cannot be called original; without the cultural artifact of a ‘queer’, heterosexuality cannot perhaps assert its naturalness. Talking of human rights or identity politics undermines the normalizing power that heterosexuality wields over other sexualities. It serves to re-inscribe heterosexuality as the dominant, normative, majoritarian way of life and love. Heterosexism and homophobia therefore need to be questioned on their own terms in order to unravel their points of alliance with other systems of oppression.

For Butler, the hegemonic construction of (hetero)sexuality is secured through reiterative performative gestures that is not just about quilting. Performativity is the process of reiterative citational practices of conventions and norms that keep reappearing over time and whose authoritative stance is upheld through an obscuring of its historicity. Butler (1990) argues that the cultural matrix through which one’s ‘gender identity’ becomes intelligible assumes that first there is a sex (biological: male and female) that expresses itself through a gender (cultural: masculine and feminine) and then through a desire (biological/psychological, but nevertheless heterosexual). This compulsory

heterosexualization of desire instates a dynamics of self where the internal coherence of either gender identity (male or female) feeds on a stable and oppositional heterosexual attraction (men and women are bound to be attracted to each other) that is projected as biologically essential, natural and universal. Further, heterosexuality’s naturalization requires that certain kinds of desires cannot exist – that is, those in which gender does not flow from sex (gender identity disorder) and those in which desire does not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender. These ‘queer’ moments of desire and sexuality occupy perhaps the domain of the socially abject, the domain of unlivable and unviable passion.

As Butler explains in her later work:

... performativity ... consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s “will” or “choice”; ... (t)he normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as “being” – works not only through reiteration, but through *exclusion* as well. (Butler, 2000: 5-7)

In this context, the hegemonic Symbolic is understood by Butler not as a “hypostasized, proto-transcendental, pre-historical, pre-social” Order but as “the normative dimension of the constitution of the subject within language” through “demands, taboos, sanctions, injunctions, prohibitions, impossible idealizations, threats – performative speech acts, as it were, that wield the power to produce the field of culturally viable ... subjects”.

What does Butler’s notion of performativity offer for the sexuality rights movement? Moreover, if performativity is construed as that power of discourse that produces effects through reiteration, how are we to understand the *limits of such production*, the *constraints* under which such production occurs? Are these social and political *limits* on the resignifiability of class, gender, race and caste or are these limits that are, strictly speaking, outside the social? Are we to understand this ‘outside’ as that which permanently resists discursive elaboration,

or is it a “*variable boundary set and reset by specific political investments*” (Butler, 2000:5-7)? The notion that all identities are produced in a field of differential relations is understandable. But are these relations given or natural? Do they constitute fully a structural level of differentiation? Butler asks:

Is the incompleteness ... that hegemony requires one in which the subject-in-process is incomplete precisely because it is constituted through exclusions that are politically salient, not structurally static or foundational? ... In other words, should not the incompleteness ... (be) linked to the democratic contestation over signifiers? (Butler, 2000:5-7)

If so, how can these politically salient exclusions be mobilized to articulate a “democratic contestation over signifiers”? Would a return of the politically salient exclusions be articulated through identity forms that carry their mark of exclusion, their originary nonconformity? How would one situate the counter-hegemonic move and what would be its contours? Would the counter-hegemonic move necessarily have to adopt the mores of the hegemonic to point out exclusions, to demand recognition? Does one give up on the politics of recognition completely? What would happen to one’s freedom to believe in oneself as non-pathological? What would happen to one’s freedom to live and love as one wishes, and not lose her job on this account? What would happen to one’s freedom not to marry and have children or to marry one’s homosexual partner and have surrogate children? What would happen to the freedom to *live*? Can one talk of such possibilities without having to worry about essentialisms, naturalisms, universalisms, depoliticization, deradicalization etc? What then is the politics of (im)possible identities? Diana Fuss draws our attention to the “slippery notion of identity” and “the elusive status of politics”. “*Is politics based on identity, or is identity based on politics?*” she asks (1989:100, emphasis added). Does a lesbian identity necessarily offer one with a natural and secure platform for a lesbian politics? Is the name ‘lesbian’ a self-explanatory one, a homogeneous embodiment of marginalization and therefore a bearer of radical transformation?

In her “personal reflections on ten years of lesbian political and social gatherings”<sup>25</sup>, Ashwini Sukthankar (lesbian activist) talks of the “slow shifting of a collective identity” within the lesbian community in India. She describes the tensions and undercurrents that animated discussions among themselves during the eighties and nineties as they tried to evolve a ‘true’ collective lesbian identity. Their dilemma over who could be included into the bandwagon of lesbians hovered around the several categories of butch lesbians, femme lesbians, lesbians who were going through a passing phase and those with avowed long term commitments, born lesbians and women expressing desire for the opposite sex, lesbians who became mothers, visiting lesbians and academic lesbians, women from the feminist movement and women from the corporate sector and so forth. Her account maps the significant journey undertaken by lesbian politics, moving from understandings of secure, self-evident lesbian identities to first include more and more fractured, blurred and infinite sexual identities. And as they embarked on a self-reflexive rethinking of their “assumptions, as a community, and to remind ourselves that our struggles to change mindsets are not just about the world at large, but also about our very own circles”, what appeared on the surface as politically baffling carried the promise of a larger sisterhood. A sharing of space that inevitably spawns a dismembering of one’s self, and an effort to think an (im)possible politics of collective solidarity amidst a (re)membered solitude of selves.

While the differences *between* lesbian and gay sexuality are well recognized, what is being increasingly realized is that there are multiple differences *within* these two identities, and among bisexual, transgender and queer people. Face to face with these multiplying non-normative sexual identities, one comes to realize that desire cannot be delimited and constrained in normative groupings. The LGBTQ

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<sup>25</sup> This short piece appeared in *Swakanthey (in her own voice)*, the Sappho biannual newsletter, this particular issue being published in June 2004 on the occasion of the group’s ‘birthday’.

movement is somewhat held together in a precarious bind by its distance from, and its resistance to, the heterosexual norm. Queer theory responds in a way to the proliferating modes of acknowledging one's particular erotic sense of self by conceptualizing sexuality in terms other than those of individual identity or selfhood. Rather, it suggests that commitment to identity is part of the problem. These theorists argue that 'lesbians' and 'gays' are themselves potentially normalizing because they entail definitions of desire and conduct that require subjective conformity. This school of thought advocates politics based on resistance to all norms<sup>26</sup>.

Building on the insights provided by queer theory, one needs to start rethinking the presumed connections between essence and identity and between identity and politics. Moving away from a notion of identity based on essence does not necessarily signify the end of personhood or recognition. But how then does one negotiate the contingent 'I'? As Fuss (103) reminds us, accepting identity as splintered does not suggest that the 'I' is made up of numerous identities all rolled into one – a happy conglomeration of multiple selves such as daughter, lesbian, woman, feminist – all-accommodating and open to deployment at strategic junctures. It is not to suggest either that identity being a historically contingent construct, it is possible to be possessed and repossessed; anyone and everyone can inhabit the skin, so to speak, of any identity formation and stake claim to a political subjecthood. Identities need to be understood as constitutively contingent – constantly formed and immediately dismantled. This notion of identity as work-in-progress (Heyes, 2003) is achieved in an intersubjective sociality with the important realization that identities are always forged and claimed in connectedness with, as also exclusion of, anOther.

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<sup>26</sup> Queer politics too can sometimes become an epitome of normativization when 'queerness' itself becomes the norm. Going against the norm can become the ground for an essentializing of identity, losing its subversive potential.

### **Forging a Sisterhood**

Feminism has been somewhat w(e)ary of sexuality. While lesbians have formed part of the feminist movement, as in the struggle for abortion rights and the right to obtain contraception free of cost, and feminists have also rallied with lesbians for their right to sexual 'freedom', lesbianism per se has failed to occupy feminist thought for any sustainable period of time (Lesselier, 2003; Bonnet, 2003; Gonda, 1998). It has been argued that feminism's inclination to map gender issues as separate from sexuality and prioritizing gender as *the* basis of women's oppression has served to naturalize heterosexuality as definitive of woman, and, erroneously sediment women's vulnerability elsewhere.

Echoing the attempts to make sense of their sexual desire, identity, ethics and politics, a recurring theme in lesbian theoretical writings has been the relational chasm that separates lesbians and/or lesbianism from other identities, groups and movements like heterosexual feminism, gay liberation and queer politics. Though the gay-lesbian movement has broadly functioned as a unified political coalition, there has been a certain moving apart between the two camps and this is reflective of their differing theoretical concerns as also of "qualitative differences between gay and lesbian relations". Staking claim to Foucault's theories of the sexual subject as a historical, cultural product, gay theorists have preferred to cast off their faith in a notion of 'gay essence' and embark on a detailed analysis of the historical construction of sexualities (Fuss, 1989:98). This theoretical shift, as it were, finds realization in their personal lives too, as they portray a whole spectrum of sexually creative lifestyles and a proliferation of sexual cultures. Their supposed affinity for sexual pleasure as evident from their investment in anonymous lovers, pederasty and their preoccupation with ageist standards of sexual attractiveness has drawn flak from lesbian activists and feminists alike. While mainstream critics have dubbed this 'promiscuity' as responsible for bringing forth disaster on this world in the form of AIDS, feminists have implicated male homosexuality

as ‘partners in crime’ with patriarchy for what has been read as their disdain for committed and shared emotional bonding. Lesbian women on the other hand have seen themselves as ‘a natural agent of subversion’ by virtue of being women within the patriarchal hegemonic – a fact that is also said to ally them more with heterosexual women than with gay men<sup>27</sup>. The sisterhood or for that matter the ‘politics of friendship’ between feminists and lesbians has been equally fraught. One contentious issue has been the lesbian’s assumed hostility towards men and the feminist’s reluctance to re-examine the notion of naturalized heterosexuality.<sup>28</sup>

The realization, around the second half of the twentieth century, that mere public visibility through participation in work force, obtaining education and voting rights and the promise of political and social equality could not be seen to be synonymous with women’s emancipation, preceded the increasing focus on women’s personal lives, still marked by violence and victimization. Consequently the site of analysis and politics shifted to the domain of the family, issues of motherhood, pornography and prostitution. Gayle Rubin in her work, “Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975) argued that compulsory heterosexuality and its exchange systems of kinship controlled by men structured women’s sexuality in a manner that maintained women’s oppression in widely different cultures. This formulation that she called the *sex/gender system* examined the heterosexual division of labor and ‘domestication of women’ as

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<sup>27</sup> Fuss contends that this line of thought erases male homosexuality’s radical potential; it trivializes male homosexuality’s challenge to dominant notions of masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality. Moreover, it also imposes on lesbian lives strict standards of sexual and relational propriety that might preclude pleasure and diversity in the name of ‘true’ lesbian culture and political correctness (1989, 47). One related debate that sometimes takes on an acrimonious shape among lesbians is regarding replication of heterogender norms among butch and femme lesbians or transgender women.

<sup>28</sup> While heterosexual women are designated collaborators, bisexual women are the most maligned, accused as they are of being turncoats.

underwriting gender roles oppressive to women<sup>29</sup>. While these issues were urgently debated and addressed, lesbian feminists like Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig zeroed in on heterosexuality as the essence of women’s subjugation. Accusing heterosexual feminists of “sleeping with the enemy”, lesbian feminists urged women folk to identify the *real* source of oppression and shun all love relations with men. The call for “political lesbianism” placed the onus on all “fully committed feminists” to become lesbians in the political sense even if they did not have sexual relations with other women. Lesbianism in this definition therefore took on the mantle of political urgency rather than sexual preference, of political duty rather than pleasure. Adrienne Rich’s notion of the “lesbian continuum” proposed that *all women were lesbians*, that all women had, at some point of their lives related in some sense or the other to *another* woman, if not to another woman, at least to the mother as another woman. Monique Wittig’s statement, on the other hand, “lesbians are not women” proposed that the notion ‘woman’ always found meaning and substance in heterosexual modes of signification and ‘woman’ as a category could be defined only in relation to Man. While both these propositions carried the potential of forging feminist sisterhood and raising pertinent questions about the

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<sup>29</sup> Gayle Rubin’s work tried to bring gender and sexuality together into one social framework in order to make sense of the conditions of women’s subjugation. She tried to show that kinship relations were in the service of obligatory heterosexuality and that gender identities were in some sense derived from kinship relations, and so if one could break the nexus of kinship by refusing to toe the line of heterosexuality, in a way one could escape the clutches of gender identity. Her later work, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” was a moving away from this position, from “a simple hetero-homo opposition,” because differences in sexual conduct are not very intelligible in terms of binary models” (1994, 70-71). If “Traffic in Women” was written as a response to Marxism’s inability to address issues of gender, “Thinking Sex” was a response to feminism’s inadequacies at dealing with issues of sexuality, especially polymorphous sexual conduct.

naturalness of heterosexuality, they came with their own problems. As Fuss summarizes (1989, 44)

If Wittig is unable to account for the specificity of women who do not identify as lesbian, Rich (quite paradoxically) is unable to account for the specificity of those women who *are* lesbians. Whereas Wittig's notion of "lesbian" is too exclusive, too reified, Rich's notion is too inclusive, too vague (emphasis in original).

While heterosexual feminists found the possibility of woman-loving-woman an appealing proposition, they saw lesbianism as an impossible identity to assume in their struggle for liberation. Lesbians on the other hand became more and more radicalized through their analysis of the 'heterosocial' system and the reluctance on the feminists' part to take note of issues pertaining to one's sexual practice and one's sexed self.

The debate remains unresolved till date as to whether gender and sexuality need to be treated as separate analytic categories or need to be thought out in conjunction. A prioritization of sexuality can entail a conservative reading of patriarchy as premised on the sole ground of denied female sexuality, and the exercise of 'sexual choice' as the fundamental path to women's emancipation. On the other hand, focusing on gender as the cornerstone of oppression-exploitation (as also the objectification and exchange of women) tends to erase the costs of the daily struggles that saturate the personal and professional lives of 'sexual minority' groups and their complex survival strategies.<sup>30</sup> But these debates do not always necessarily take up concrete oppositional positions. Gayle Rubin (in revision of her earlier analysis) is of the opinion that gender and sexuality need to be treated as separate analytic categories and whose intersections carry significance for the investigation of oppression. Others like Butler (1990, 1993), in

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<sup>30</sup> Issues such as repeal/reform of section 377, or the human rights campaign, for instance, have stood tall on the shoulders of the LGBT movement; these moves in the last two decades have found visibility only in gay-lesbian circles, with very little or no support from the feminist movement.

a more psychoanalytic mode, sees the socialization of gender and the materialization of the sexed bodies as taking shape through the operations of a hegemonic heterosexuality that sediments itself on politically salient exclusions, on the production of socially unviable and unlivable bodies (abject bodies) and sexual desires.

### **Melancholy Gender:**

Butler shows how in "The Ego and the Id", Freud claims that the final breaking of any attachment happens through the incorporation of the attachment as identification and this identification comes to form the ego. This melancholic attachment allows the loss of the object to the external world but preserves it as part of the ego. This then becomes a way to disavow the loss or postpone the suffering of the loss. In "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905) Freud suggests that certain attachments that are incestuous and homosexual have to be given up as both unlivable passion and ungrievable loss. Thus the character of the ego is shown to take shape through

sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief ... through prohibitions which demand the loss of certain sexual attachments and demands as well that those losses not be avowed and not be grieved. (Butler, 1997: 133)

Thus one's gender disposition comes into being through a double disavowal. One not only has to give up one's libidinal attachment as unlivable, one also has no chance to mourn the loss as it is a loss that is not acceptable and therefore remains un-grieved – it is, as if, a forgetting of the forgotten. Thus it can be argued that positions of masculinity and femininity are not stable formations and not without a sense of limit or finitude or even lack. If one can argue that heterosexuality is strengthened through prohibitions, then one such prohibition is homosexual attachment, being subjected to a double disavowal – a situation of 'never having loved' and a 'never having lost' – a situation of foreclosure; foreclosure produces the real(m) of homosexuality, homosexuality as the rem(a)inder of hegemonic sexuality, homosexuality as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss. As Butler argues:

[T]he girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as a part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification. Thus the identification contains within it both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the ungrieved loss of homosexual attachment (1997:136).

Then again:

Becoming a “man” within this logic requires repudiating femininity as a precondition for the heterosexualization of sexual desire and its fundamental ambivalence. If a man becomes heterosexual by repudiating the feminine, where could that repudiation live except in an identification which his heterosexual career seeks to deny? Indeed, the desire for the feminine is marked by that repudiation: he wants the woman he would never be. ... One of the most anxious aims of his desire will be to elaborate the difference between him and her, and he will seek to discover and install proof of that difference (1997: 137).

According to Butler, Freud articulates contemporary cultural logic when he says that gender is achieved and stabilized through heterosexual positionings. Heterosexuality and its recognizable gender positions naturalize themselves through such a repeated and ritualized prohibition throughout culture. Therefore in Freud’s scheme a threat to heterosexuality is a threat to gender also.

### **Feminist-Lesbian-Queer:**

In this context, the polemic between feminists and lesbians as also queer theorists regarding the interrelationship between gender and sexuality (Jackson, 1998:141) is worth taking note of. The central concern of gay-lesbian theorists is heteronormativity – the ways in which sexuality comes to be conceived and reinforced in terms of a monolithic sexual desire flowing almost naturally between two ‘opposite sexes’. Their focus, arising from categories of ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ sexual behaviors, has therefore been on homosexuality. Queer theory taking

off from gay-lesbian theories expands its realm of investigation to interrogate any sexual activity and identity that falls into the categories of both normative and deviant. They are equally concerned with gender roles as also their implication in the preservation of heterosexual supremacy. But unlike feminists who take issue both with the ways in which heterosexuality and its ‘opposite sexes’ come to gain its normative status (heteronormativity) as also its implication in the subordination of women (heteropatriarchy), queer theorists do not see gender as necessarily hierarchical and do not concern themselves with the intricacies of patriarchy.

This ‘oversight’ comes to haunt the lived-lives of gay-lesbian and other queer groups when they are charged (by mainstream activists and theorists alike) with replicating the same gender stereotypes that are considered oppressive and objectifying in the heterosexual system. Resistance to dominant norms remains constrained by the active/passive binary of butch/femme roles (with their accompanying sexual division of labor in or outside the household) that are often seen to permeate the love relations among members of these groups<sup>31</sup>. The problematic of how to mark a definite difference and who should take the responsibility of resisting slippages is not one to be resolved easily.

The pressure to etch out a distinct theoretical separation (as also the separation in lived-lives) between heterosexuality and lesbianism has been a compulsive one though. It has often prompted lesbian feminists to not only reject heterosexual feminists’ worlds but also to set impossible standards within their own community. Strict dress and behavior codes with the compulsion to carry in oneself the trademark of difference become an inevitable political statement. But once touted as a political stance (rejecting dominant images of ‘proper femininity’), unconventional dress codes and behavior repertoires have

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<sup>31</sup> Another important debate around replicating stereotypes has been regarding the issue of marriage and whether lesbians and gays too should fight for the right to marry – an institution identified as avowedly heterosexist and exploitative. Both feminist circles and gay-lesbian activists remain acutely divided on this account.

often been subsumed under the fashion statement. The need to occupy the queer body space seems to take on a note of urgency, as the queer groups get more interested in experimenting relentlessly with sex roles and appearances.<sup>32</sup> Situating queer politics exclusively in the repudiation of heterosexuality can restrict resistance self-deceptively to a re-signification of cultural norms and societal mores. Questioning heterosexuality to bring up its foreclosed others is not to confine the materiality of sexuality to libidinal pleasures, or, to the marking of differences of sex-sexuality through cultural signs and symbols, but to interrogate the materiality of sexuality in its complex linkages to other social structures. ‘Gender bending’ and proliferation of identities can become ideal breeding grounds for multinational commodity culture as consumer capitalism thrives on a construction of subjectivities in terms of ‘lifestyle’, ‘choice’, ‘individuality’ and ‘freedom’, obscuring the connections between heterosexuality, gender and [the sexual] division of labor (Hennessy, 1996:236).

Discussions on sexuality in our country have been rather skewed, with the tendency to see sexuality as a biological/psychic instinct rather than explore issues of sexuality as a significant constituent in the geo-economic and bio-political production of life. While a veritable silence around the question has dogged political and academic circles, the space of the legal, demographic and medical disciplines has more than kept the issue of sexuality perpetually in the limelight.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The increased visibility of sexual minority groups comes often with a “hysterical” display of their queer excesses and their highly eroticized subjectivities. Public events (queer groups in our country have in recent times successfully organized a number of film shows and street rallies allowing them to make an indelible impact on the public space) become more a parade of one’s queerness, an attempt to affront another’s sense of normalcy than anything else. While this can serve to alarm and outrage another from his/her peaceful slumber of familiarity, one remains doubtful about its transformative potential as the political culture of the LGBT movement moves into a cultural politics that is not always a useful politics of culture.

<sup>33</sup> For a brief account on the sexual economies in our context see, “Introduction” in *The Question of Silence* ed. Mary John and Janaki Nair, 1998.

The women’s movement has not been totally silent on the issue of sexuality though. But the understanding of sexuality has been more in terms of it being a physiological process giving rise to a psychological vulnerability particularly in women and thereby creating a socio-cultural system of control and oppression where women are seen as being predominantly in the victim position and men predominantly in the perpetrator position. The debates around sexuality have then revolved around men’s control of women’s sexuality, so that sexuality has traditionally been discussed only in situations of violence such as rape, pornography and prostitution. Much later, sexuality formed part of the discussions on women’s health rights as a reproductive issue (mother and child care, and the population policy) and in the public health domain as the AIDS menace and the ‘dangerous’ sexuality of the brothel. More recently within the sexual rights movement, the discussion hovers around ‘individual choice’ and ‘human rights’. The women’s movement in India with its largely left leanings finds the issue of sexuality a distraction from more pertinent problems such as illiteracy, poverty alleviation, domestic violence, women’s empowerment and so forth. Moreover, the failure, in the dominant strands of the women’s movement, to perceive sexuality as a locus of pleasure to be discussed or supported publicly, has further alienated the lesbian-gay movement. Most alliances and interventions from the side of the mainstream movement have been in times of crisis, for instance, when there have been lesbian suicides or gay murders. Most of the discussions have proceeded as non-heterosexual desire being a question of personal sexual preference, thereby getting fore-grounded in the identity politics of the lesbian and gay community.

Such is the disdain for issues regarding non-normative sexuality that there have been instances where lesbians were not permitted to carry their group banners in March 8<sup>th</sup> rallies – a decision that went on to further prevent lesbians from participating at all in the rally even if they were not raising the issue of lesbian rights. Seeking to mark a clear disjunction between ‘women’s’ interests and interests pertaining to sexual rights and preferences, it was clarified that such issues could

receive support from the women's movement as issues coming under the broad category of civil liberties and democratic rights but not as constituting "common women's life-worlds" (Menon, 2004:231). This then is symptomatic of the fraught relation between feminism and lesbianism. Even in spaces where the women's movement is more accommodative of lesbian concerns, it arises more from a feeling of concerned sisterhood rather than from any inclination to seriously engage with the issue of (hetero)sexuality. And as long as the different lesbian groups remain content with this bonding of sisterhood grounded in a shared experience of suffering and discrimination, lesbianism will remain an issue of sexual preference (at most, of sexual rights) and heterosexuality will retain its hegemonic and normative status. The heterosexual hegemonic is as if not exclusive; it is inclusive; it includes the non-heterosexual other as victim in need of minority rights. The point is not to co-exist in shared participation in each other's struggles for emancipation – where two secure spaces and two secure struggles, secure in their respective ways, come together and share a larger space for a larger goal. The point is, rather, to be menaced by the Other, such that there are no secure spaces, such that one remains inalienably constituted by the Other, such that one's own secure foundations of self-hood, knowledge and practice are in an overdetermined relation with the Other. Laying open the field of sexual economies, to map the sites where sexuality gets materialized, is to work the weaknesses in the system, to destabilize its workings in order to reconfigure, remaining acutely aware that every political contestation is necessarily contingent.

Barring some, most sections of the feminist movement are of the opinion that sexuality is primarily a gay-lesbian problem, failing to acknowledge the hegemonic operations of heterosexuality that bestow on them the privilege of occupying the 'majority' position and banish such issues to the 'minority sexuality rights' forum. Thus two separate spheres of struggle – one focused on issues of poverty, unemployment and violence and the other focused on sexual freedom, choice – are mapped out, the former taking heterosexuality as naturalized and the

latter often retaining gender stereotypes, unquestioned. While the 'mainstream' feminist movement ponders on the problems of overt *sexism*, the gay-lesbian groups feel compelled to fight *heterosexism*.

There is a whole other party to the debate here that we will only briefly mention. Faced with the charge from right wing circles and the State that homosexuality is a western import and is antithetical to 'our' culture (vide the arguments forwarded against reform of Section 377), and to a certain extent to oppose social and political activists who refused to acknowledge the existence of problems related to sexual choice, there have been efforts by gay-lesbian activists to recover narratives from India's written and oral traditions. These collections seek to establish the fact that homoeroticism has been an integral part of our tradition and people indulging in same-sex love "were honored and successful members of society who contributed in major ways to thought, literature, and the general good" (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000:xxiv). Works like Vanita and Kidwai's sees the fluidity of *sexual relations* and freedom of choice of sexual partners in representations from Indian pasts as evidence of the plurality of ancient and medieval Indian philosophy as well, although these, and indeed popular notions of the fluidity of gender in the Indian philosophical imaginary that are said to speak for the particular Indian experience, sit in uneasy contest with feminist readings of antagonism between the sexes or of the operations of traditional patriarchy. There have also been collections of autobiographical accounts, poetry, fiction and gay journals that have sought to place the issue of non-heterosexual love decisively in the public arena. While these works are commendable in their research rigor and commitment to public awareness, arguing for an indigenous homosexuality can become a tricky base for seeking legitimation and even prove to be politically numbing.

**Lesbian Standpoint: In lieu of a Conclusion**

A picture held us captive.

And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language  
and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Having marked our differences as also unease with the understanding of ‘lesbian’ as just an ‘identity’, as just *another* category qualifying for induction-inclusion into the universal rights frame, rights of a purportedly ‘marginalized’ ‘sexual minority’, this monograph comes to an end with the rather (im)possible search for a ‘lesbian standpoint’; lesbian standpoint as the counter-point to the heterosexual-androcentric-phallogenic nodal point.

*Why a standpoint?* Standpoint – because we do not consider ourselves victims, victims in need of the benevolence of the heterosexual Social. Standpoint – because we do not consider ourselves marginalized and crave for inclusion in the *given* frame of the heterosexual Hegemonic. Standpoint – because we do not wish to remain ‘embodied insiders’ within our ghetto. Standpoint – because we *do* value our lived lives, our complex position(ings), our language(s). Standpoint – because we wish to pose against the heterosexual hegemonic a counter-hegemonic imagination of the sexual. Standpoint – because we wish to pit against the sublime violence of the heterosexual sexual imagination a counter-hegemonic imagination, that is hardly violent and is perhaps menaced by the ethical. Standpoint – because we wish to propose another worldview, another ‘picture’ different from the *One* presently holding us captive. Standpoint – because we wish to get *outside* hegemonic language, get outside that which gets repeated and reiterated inexorably; a *turning outward*, as if; a *turning from within outward* of a story-teller hitherto alongside another in the same space, hitherto completing one circle with a common centre; one is dependent on this ‘outside’ to lay claim to what is one’s own; one must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself (Butler, 2004: 7).

What then is or could be a specifically lesbian standpoint? What are its conceptual contours? What are its epistemo-ontological moorings? What ethico-politics does it inaugurate? Could such a standpoint (if there is one) contribute to a radical rethinking of the hegemonic of the sexual? Could it contribute to a re-signification of the categories through which the world is made visible to us? Could it lay the ground for a counter-hegemonic re-articulation of the hegemonic Symbolic? What (in)valuable insights do the lives of lesbians ... do lesbian lives offer to us ... to and about ‘our’ lives? Or are the lives of lesbians as also lesbian lives just the groundwork ... the *grundrisse* ... just the founding *cue-clue* for a more radical beginning – a more radical and robust rethinking of the sexual, of the ethical of the sexual as also the sexual of the ethical? Sandra Harding points out,

In identifying what one can see with the help of a lesbian standpoint, I do not point exclusively to insights *about* lesbians. The standpoint epistemologies have a different logic. ... The point is that starting thought from the (many different) daily activities of lesbians enables us to see things that might otherwise have been invisible to us, not just about those lives but about heterosexual women’s lives and men’s lives, straight as well as gay. (1994:344-345)

Thus, starting thought from the (many different) daily activities of lesbians, from the polymorphous language of lesbian sexuality, a language not circumscribed by either heterosexism or androcentrism or phallogenicism or by the ‘penetrative peno-vaginal eros of depths’ one can feel-think the contours of a lesbian standpoint. One can think the contours of a lesbian standpoint in the sense of a *re-turn* as also a *turning outwards*. How is it a *return*? It is a return in the sense that it is a *turn to* the language of the *hitherto excluded* – *turn to* the *excluded as resource* – *turn not* to an authentic or originary point, but to that which has hitherto remained *unspoken*; where the *unspoken* stands for silence, which is “found within language and not beyond language” (Moitra, 1984), where the *unspoken* is the *constitutive outside* of language, that which cannot be said but which is *shown*. How is it a

*turning outwards*? It is a turning outwards in the sense that one *turns away* from the heterosexist-androcentric-phallogentric Centre/Inside and turns outwards, turns towards that which is not Centre; one turns *ex-Centric* so as to get a feel of things that might otherwise have been invisible to us, not just about lesbian lives but about heterosexual women's lives and men's lives, straight as well as gay.

Thus a standpoint that is possessed – possessed in the sense of being haunted – by the 'lives of lesbians' as also 'lesbian lives' could in turn help us make a case for a non-normative, non-heterosexual, non-androcentric, non-phallogentric future of desire, a future that remains moored on the one hand to a lesbian standpoint and on the other to a feminist standpoint, to radical politics in the arena of both gender and sexuality, gender and sexuality in their overdetermined imbrications. The mainstream or the hegemonic imagination of sexuality is that of a monogamous heterosexual non-incestuous penetrative reproductive able-bodied reasonable safe sexuality and thereby that which is constitutionally phallogentric and androcentric. In this male and masculine imagination of sexuality, an imagination premised on the "same attractions and separations ... the same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections" (Irigaray, 1999) woman's sexuality can be conceived only in terms of being *complementary* – of being the complement to that of Man/Phallus – of merely responding, receiving and reproducing man's sexuality. This androcentric, phallogentric and heterosexist imagination of sexuality is further reinforced through the dynamics of the oedipal family where the male and female child is socialized through the foreclosure of certain other desires such as incest and homosexuality, incest and homosexuality as non-livable, non-viable and non-grievable. Lesbian standpoint thinking could help us bring to crisis the hegemonic heterosexual imagination of family as also the heterosexual imagination of kinship network. It could also help us redefine women's (as also men's) relation to each other that remains to this day a founding moment, a founding concern for a feminist-lesbian sisterhood. Lesbian standpoint could also give a 'lesbian method' – a method different from the method pursued in androcentric-phallogentric thought, a method that could in turn inaugurate a 'lesbian language'.

What is the language of androcentrism-phallogentricism? The language of androcentrism-phallogentricism is the language of the *One*, the *One* of Man/Phallus, where woman-feminine is the lacking other ( $\sim p$ ) of Man-masculine ( $p$ ). It is in this context that Irigaray (1985a; 1985b) tries to think woman and the feminine unmoored and unhinged from androcentrism-phallogentricism, where woman or the feminine is not the lacking other ( $\sim p$ ) of Man/Phallus.

The Irigarayan understanding of the 'feminine' is centered on the *poly-morpho-genesis* of the woman's body, on a certain *lesbian corporeality*, on the *auto-bio-hetero-graphic language libidinale* of the *two lips*, the infinite and uncertain caress of the *two lips* in perpetual embrace, an *infidel heteroglossia* of the erotic, a *chameleon-choreo-graph* as against the Simple Dry Erectility of the Phallus. The Irigarayan rendition of the feminine is premised on the refusal of an eroticism of entry, containment, appropriation, and possession; it is premised on the refusal of the very idea(l) of *having or being* the phallus. For Irigaray, woman's body and woman's sexuality cannot be collapsed and reduced to *one* sexual organ; this would only reaffirm the male mono-logic of the "primacy of the phallus".

You are not *in me*. ... I do not contain you or retain you in my stomach, my arms, my head. ... Nor in my memory, my mind, my language. ... You are there, like my skin. (Irigaray, 1999: 82-90)

Important in this respect is Irigaray's *imagery/imagination* of the 'feminine', which defies the logic of the *One*, the logic of *only the One* created by patriarchy. It is in the real(m) of the feminine, situated libidinally-linguistically in the woman's body, in the "anti-penetrative eros of surfaces", that the alternative has to be *found-founded*. Both heterosexuality and motherhood, as "masochistic prostitution of the (female) body to a desire that is not her own", remain problematic in this *imagery/imagination*.

The particularity of the invocation of the Irigarayan woman-feminine show once again the necessity of addressing the issues of both sexism



## *Lesbian Standpoint*

## *Lesbian Standpoint*

*of the category of resistance* – the various forms of politics we have known – within which it may be named.

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This monograph comes to an end with one last point on the relationship between feminist politics and lesbian politics. There was a time when a feminist politics was critiqued for its failure to attend to the specific needs of lesbian women. This form of exclusionary politics led to the emergence of a separate stream of lesbian politics that attempted to mark out its exclusive space and boundary. But the constitutive need to address women's problems once again brought the lesbian movement in close proximity with the feminist movement. The interfacing was charted out in terms of a conditioned inclusion. The women's movement sought to include lesbians within their movement by showing support and solidarity in singular incidents of discrimination and torture faced by lesbian women on account of sexual orientation; feminism on the whole distanced itself from any critical engagement with the issue of sexuality in general and lesbianism in particular. This 'marriage of convenience' can not 'bear fruit' unless there is a critical embrace of gender and sexuality in a manner that arouses us to question the given understanding of political and ethical sisterhood. Only the passion of an incestuous intertwining of gender sexuality can perhaps bring us to a lesbian standpoint.

How are we to think the incestuous intertwining of gender and sexuality? Would we think it in terms of the metaphor of the *two lips*, where 'gender sexuality' are somewhat like the *two lips* that are one and yet two, two and yet one, where 'gender sexuality' are somewhat like two lips that are distinct, different and separate and yet make a connected/attached whole. For Irigaray the *two lips* symbolize neither the monism of One nor the dualism ('p'/'~p') of the two. Rather, it comes as that which puts under erasure or in doubt the stability and constancy of both the logic of the *One* and the *two*.

As of now, these might approach metaphorical reflections more than evidenced ones. We hope to do more work as we go along.

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