



FROM FIXITY TO FLOW: EMPOWERING THEORIES IN GENDER STUDIES

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Abstract

Each particular human group has a partial view of reality. Each has its own categories or lenses through which it sees things, including human sexuality. Those who live on the mountain have their own worldview and can talk more about their mountain experience than those who live along the sea. For all of us it is very difficult to move out from our own frame of reference to appreciate and understand those who don't think like us. The worst is when people tend to fear, categorize and reject what they do not understand.

Introduction

In this paper our intention is to explore the question of the oppression of female sexuality in society, and at the same time propose alternative theories of conceptualising female gender. Sexuality is the way we experience and express ourselves as sexual beings whether male or female. Sex is one of the most important drives we have to deal with as human beings and often it occupies much of our time. Sexuality is also an integral part of our personality. There are many factors that help us develop our sexuality and one of the most important is gender, and so, whether male or female, gender will have a major influence on the development of sexuality.

But culture is another main determinant of sexuality. It exercises control over sexuality and establishes well defined roles for women and men and draws clear lines between what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate sexualities.

Power and Sexuality

It is a fact that we are born as boys and girls but the way we live our sexual lives as boys and girls, and as men and women, is determined by the cultural norms of society. In other words our sexuality adopts what is normative in our culture until probably we begin to experience



dysphoria and rebel against that form of sexuality which does not correspond to me. The idea of Michel Foucault comes to bear on this when he says that sexuality is not an innate or natural quality of the body but rather the effect of historical power relations (Foucault, 1977). In this Foucault reacts against compulsory heterosexuality but also against male domination of female sexuality. This also corresponds with Judith Butler's theory that sexuality or sexual identity is performative rather than a core aspect of essential entity (Butler 1999, p. 25). Our behaviour and attitudes concerning sex or sexuality are due to our socialisation in human groups. This does not answer all questions about women's subordination or our sexuality. Even Foucault's and Butler's idea that sexuality is not innate leaves human sexuality ungrounded and free-floating. Foucault has been criticized by some feminists like Sandra Bartky for saying that there is no such thing as a natural body for why then would the oppression of women continue to be perpetuated (Bartky, 1988). But the idea of neutral sexuality reminds me of Ortega who said that it is difficult to arrive at an adequate concept of that which is not a thing because the mind has the habit of thinking things (Marias, 1967, p.454). For Aristotle the categories were modes of inflections of being to which the mind adapted itself but for Kant the mind already contains the categories and the things conform to the mind. But what is interesting and liberating in view of female gender is when Kant explains that categories are in our understanding and not directly in the being of things. Here it must be borne in mind that defining female sexuality along heterosexual lines gives unfair representation of women's reality. Our societies do not provide a fair environment where women can fully define who they want to be. In Rosalind's words to be a woman is to be constantly addressed and scrutinized (Rosalind). According to Derrida, in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it is the project of male heterosexuality that creates the undecidability of women and sexual difference (Popovicova, 2000, p. 282). In *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, Derrida reflects that women are seen as dancing, veiling, sailing, refusing to come nearer Zarathustra. This reflects women resisting being pinned down, refusing the so called phallic tendencies driven by the desire to know and control the feminine (Popovicova, p. 284). I mentioned earlier on that the socialisation process which instills patriarchal practices into the young does not end within the family but infiltrates into other social institutions like marriage, religion, education, politics and the economy. Even the selection of the sexual object just follows the cultural categories already inscribed. For example Freud said that the observance of the incest barrier, which excludes close relatives from object selection, is a demand of cultural society (Freud 1995, pp. 584–587). Feelings against incest run so deeply that we might think it is instinctual but it is not. Cultural or sex norms differ from place to place and sometimes are contradictory or back and forth. It is like what Foucault says that power does not operate from a single mechanism of control but in complex, contradictory, overlapping ways which produce domination and opposition, subordination and resistance. People talk of child



sexual abuse or defilement but the same people will marry their young daughter to an old man and this is not considered as defilement. Thus the cultural perceptions of gender are so much enshrined in our life's culture that it is hard to change. For example, the way a boy is brought up in the family is different from the way a girl is brought up. Family members can repudiate the parents if they find out that a boy has been brought up in an effeminate way. Right from the time the boys are growing up, they have to be assigned tough duties so that they become resilient, strong and brave for several reasons. A certain woman I interviewed said, I don't want to bring up boys like little sissies, meaning I don't want them to be like girls. She added: I want them to be tough such that even when there is no hope, there could be a little hope in them. Another one I interviewed said, I have put girls into good schools but boys into average schools so that they can fight it out, struggle and become good. She went to say: girls can find a man to marry them. Girls are encouraged to develop their feminine characteristics. Even when men go out to marry, there are certain cultural expectations of the women they will marry.

Another crucial issue in our culture is that women and girls are considered to be asexual. They are taught by elderly women to suppress their sexual desires or feelings. If a woman or girl shows interest in sex, she is considered to be a whore. This is almost like denying one's humanity and therefore it is tantamount to belittling women. Besides, women in our society are considered sacred, a source of fertility and therefore vulnerable unlike men. It is for that reason that there are sexual barriers to protect them. If a man or a boy sleeps with a girl and is caught he is to be fined or forced to marry her. Among the Iteso of eastern Uganda, if a man is found at night around a married woman's house, it is considered adultery even if he has not entered her house. He has to be fined a bull. In other African cultures, a man is not supposed to greet a woman when she is alone as it may imply that he is soliciting for sex. But the flip side is also true: that female sexuality is irresistible and frightening, and that is why many times women are sexually harassed and beaten up. Their dresses are torn when they wear miniskirts. But would women also beat up men who urinate in front of them in the streets or road sides as seen every day?

In our culture too women's subordination is enforced through rituals and other social practices such that if a man or woman has not gone through such rituals as circumcision (*imbusa* — marital ceremony of the Bemba people of Zambia) he or she is not considered a man or woman enough. You may still have undergone such rituals but if you have no children, you are a man but not man enough. Within some of these ritual ceremonies, women connive with men to oppress themselves. There are such ceremonies like twins' ceremonies among the Iteso of Uganda where a woman is undressed to her petticoat and seated on the threshold with her twins. Every woman who comes for the ritual blesses the twins and the mother with special herbs mixed with a millet paste (Mumbi, 2001). I didn't



see the man also undressed and the reason for that as I found was that the birth of twins is considered to be the fault of the woman and there are songs about that. Usually the twins' mother is supported by her woman patron to bring up twins. This woman patron has to be fed well during the time she is there and upon leaving the twins' mother has to produce a goat and therefore she even becomes poorer. There are a lot of threats if this ceremony is not performed — such as the twins dying.

Among the Bemba of Zambia, in the *imbusa* marital ceremony a woman is taught how to look after her children and her husband and more so how to satisfy her husband sexually and if she cannot learn the art she is prone to lose her husband. Within this ceremony women also enjoy and celebrate their own sexuality and show their sexual powers. They can pull up their dresses and cover them around their thighs so as to look as if they are putting on pants. Women can as well parody men's sexuality by symbolically playing men's sexual acts. These sexual acts can be sexually overpowering for the men present in this ritual. But only those who have undergone this ritual before are allowed to be part of it. They can fold a cloth to look like a man's phallus and then appear to be undressing a woman for sex and then pretend to have sexual intercourse with her. In our culture men have sexual licenses whereby, even if they have extramarital sex, they can be forgiven. It is said among the Bemba people that *ubucende bwa mwaume tabutoba inganda*, meaning the extramarital sex of a man does not destroy the house. But should a woman be caught in extramarital intercourse she will be divorced. Here too we can see a woman's sexuality is controlled by the cultural power regime and more so by men including the men in her family. The number of children a woman is supposed to have is the affair of the man's family. When married and the children are not forthcoming, it is considered a woman's fault and she may be divorced or the man may contract polygamy. If she produces a deformed child, it is her problem and not the man's.

In African society, sex is taboo and is not talked about but just done. This seems to be the norm. When a man contracts HIV/Aids, he will ask why he has been unfortunate and may associate it with witchcraft. There is a lot of premarital sex and very little sex education. Sex education would not only reduce promiscuity and HIV contraction but also help bring about self-control. Besides, it would help self-guard children against child sexual abuse or incest. Many times, it is the duty of the aunts, grandmothers or uncles to educate their nephews and nieces about sex. But these people at times are too far away to consult. This again is coupled with a low level of education. If at least people were educated, they would be more aware and cautious of the danger of HIV.

It is difficult to move out from our own frame of reference, and at times we even become emotional when it comes to changes in our cultural perceptions of gender. Therefore, I



propose to broaden our view of humanity by embarking on the views advanced by Carl Roger's and Pope John Paul II's philosophy of personalism. Much as Foucault proposes a neutral gender which might be helpful, what really is at stake is women's freedom in the sphere of life in society. They need to be supported so as to define themselves. Women have a lot of potential yet to be tapped, given a favourable environment. Carl Rogers said that for persons to grow they need an environment that provides them with genuine (openness and self-disclosure) acceptance, being seen with unconditional positive regard and empathy. He adds that without these relationships healthy personalities (women) will not develop as they should, much like a tree will not grow without sunlight and water. Rogers rejected the deterministic and essentialist view of humanity expressed both in psychoanalysis and behaviourism that others can know or define us better. No, we can do better and realize ourselves more given a better environment and conditions. Rogers sees a human being (woman) as an organism which has the tendency to self-actualize, i.e., to fulfill its potential and achieve the highest level of "beingness" it can (Rogers, 1959). As a psychologist, Rogers believed that with the provision of a good environment, individuals will move from fixed to fluid, from closed to open, from rigid to flowing (Rogers, 1958/1967, p. 135). This view of understanding humanity is not just theoretical but liberating and it must be a way of being. As indicated above, in our African society and for patriarchy in particular men have the possibility of self-representation. Therefore in our understanding of women, we must detach ourselves from an essentialist-thomistic way of reasoning and move to a philosophy that can help women to reinvent themselves and realize their potential.

Pope John Paul II in his philosophy of personalism, which I want to drive home, embarks on the "selfhood of the person" (Crosby, p.56). He wants us to understand that a person is a being who belongs to himself and who is not a part or property of anything. Each person is a being of his/her own, is so strongly gathered to himself/herself and anchored in himself/herself, that he/she resists being incorporated into any totality in which he/she would be a mere part, serving only to build up a totality. He/she is rather a totality of his/her own. This point is very important to some of us who think that once we have paid the bride price, a woman has become our property and therefore we can treat her the way we want. For John Paul II the selfhood of the person gives rise to the norm directing us to respect persons (women) because they are beings of their own and to abstain from all using, owning, absorbing of the person. This also serves to throw light on gender-based violence. If we are locked up in our traditional perception of gender which looks down on the female gender, the pope through this understanding of the selfhood of the human person calls each of us to respect human persons for what they are regardless of power, wealth or ethnicity.

The philosophy of existentialism emphasises also freedom and choice and is liberating for women. Women should have the freedom to choose who they would like to be without



fear. This would help them open up more possibilities to choose and devise their own identity rather than a fixed one. On the other hand, if they are beaten to death because of an affair (as in Bangladesh) or stripped naked because they have dressed in miniskirts, what will be produced is only lobotomy and timidity.

Conclusion

We grow up to be what we are because of the culture we are immersed in. The sexuality we have embarked on is culturally coloured. From time to time these cultural practices need to be revisited and reformulated — especially those that are asphyxiating to the other gender. We need to open up and widen our vision of humanity, creating a better world where everyone can grow and realize their potential.



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