



Review of / Reseña de: Narayanan, Amrita. *Women's Sexuality and Modern India. In a Rapture of Distress*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 200 pp. ISBN: 9780192859815

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Studies on postcolonialism are giving way to decolonial practices, as there are many rooted ideas to deconstruct, especially when it comes to female sexuality. Some efforts are being made in that direction; for example, Ahonaa Roy edited *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization. South Asia in the World Perspective* (2021), where she questioned the established notions of sexuality still prevalent today. In light of this trend, Amrita Narayanan's *Women's Sexuality and Modern India. In a Rapture of Distress* (2023) offers new insights into understanding women's sexuality in India. The book results from the author's vast engagement with sexuality; in fact, this is the third book of Amrita Narayanan, a book about the controversial figure of «women's sexuality» in the Indian patriarchal imagination, but also in the Western imaginary where the word Indian has been many times equated with negative terms such as poor, passive or tradition-bound. Amrita Narayanan has already explored female sexual desire in the South Asian continent in publications such as *The Parrots of Desire: 3,000 Years of Indian Erotica*, an edited book or in *Pha(bu)llus: A Cultural History* (2021), where she contributed with a chapter.

Feminist and postcolonial studies on the intersection between colonialism and sexuality have tended to focus mainly on the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in the British, Dutch and French empires (Leavitt-Alcántara, 2021: 233). Nonetheless, sexuality is a modern and historical construct that is battled differently within every country. That is what Amrita Narayanan posits in this book, that every country has a unique relationship with patriarchy and that, to understand India, it is crucial to grasp the Indian patriarchal imagination. Opening new venues for reinterpreting sexuality should be made through a collective effort between history and interdisciplinary sexual studies (Decker, 2021: 42). Amrita Narayanan goes a step beyond; given her background as a psychoanalyst, psychoanalysis also plays a prominent role in her study. The book is filled with unsolved questions which revolve around some of the static conceptions patriarchy imposes on women: motherhood and wifhood, as well as inter-generational differences. These responses are provided by their main protagonists, as the author resorts to interview excerpts and testimonies from her psychotherapy sessions to exemplify her arguments.

The first chapter, «Sympathies and Oppressions», departs with a scene from Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), discussing whether women should have their memories erased so patriarchal and oppressive stories stop circulating. Earning sympathy, as the chapter includes, should be a far memory if women are to recover from patriarchy. Memories are the central topic around which this book is written; quoting Amrita Narayanan, «the narrative form that is this book is structured around a cohort of women's memories of their everyday, not-explicitly-violent, sexuality under patriarchy between Indian independence and before #MeToo» (Narayanan, 2023: 1). In this chapter, the author delves into how much sympathy towards the supposedly oppressed Indian woman has increased internationally after the 2012 rape case in Delhi. All of that is connected to what she calls «a further form of closure to their sexual agency» (2023: 4).

The second chapter, «If I Win, We Lose», hinges on gendered desire. Based on vivid examples, the author relates how desire is seen as masculine, as it still occurs with binary concepts associated with feminine or masculine. Gendered desire is more prevalent in India, where the community leaves little room for implications of sexual identification; as the author puts it,

«gossip, reputation, and maternal socialisation as the three main sources of sexual suppression» (2023: 21). Amrita Narayanan exemplifies the «We Lose», as she writes in the title, in the voices of many patients whose experiences reflect that.

«Fugitive Economies» starts with a question Amrita Narayanan asked in one of her lectures: what did the students associate with 'man'? and the response from a student who states that «'being a man means doing whatever you want'» (2023: 37). This chapter builds up on both the question and the answer, foregrounding the privileges of male sexuality, a topic that continues to be delved into in the next chapter «On Women's Aggression», especially on the losses caused by women's sexual and agency powerlessness. Nevertheless, it leaves the door open after the #MeToo when more is being said about the topic.

In «Aesthetic Arrests», it is explored how the suppression of female sexuality is not cast upon all women, as «the willing surrender of autonomy, independence and power continue to be a source of sexual pleasure for women» (2023: 71). The aesthetics of sexuality implies an awareness of conflicts among the wide range of women whose sexuality differs, from those who are pleased by objectification of their sexual aesthetics to those who embrace concealment and modesty. Chapter 6, «Desire and Envy Amongst Equals», familiarises the readers with the changes occurring with sexuality because, as it has been more democratised, more importance is now given to differences among women, not only in clothing or education but also in-between generations.

Women's experience of sexual loss is posited in the next chapter, «Mutters, Whimpers, Wails», where much importance is accorded to inter-generational differences and what is considered loss or trauma. To exemplify this, Amrita Narayanan resorts to personal encounters in her lectures. The following chapter, entitled «Secret Agents», follows the previous line of thought but focuses instead on the institution of marriage, which forces women to be monogamous but on which women go rogue and, by refusing to be controlled, engage in sexual relationships outside marriage.

Chapter 9, «Sex and the Measure of Indianness», refers to the question of representation briefly mentioned in the first chapter. The author brings up a widely known topic, that women's clothes represent the nation-state, in

this case, the sari. She relates how Indianness is understood, after all, in the Indian imagination, by a set of established values: motherhood, wifehood, but mainly, desexualisation. For those who do not conform to this style, clothes, for example, are a reminder of the attack on Indian masculinisation by English colonists. Finally, the last chapter, «A Wider Bed for 'Mother'», problematises the conflicting terms «mother», «mothering», or how a mother should be or behave. Besides, she puts forward the conflictive fact that, in India, patriarchy is most evident in the role of a male baby for a mother and in how little baby girls are praised, not just in the community but also culturally speaking, which reflects on the frightening rate of female infanticide.

Overall, the work is articulate and fulfils the still-existing need to deconstruct certain concepts deeply rooted in culture, especially regarding the female body and sexuality. It is the first book of its kind where psychoanalysis blends with a study of women's sexuality in India, highlighting the most important conflicts. All of that is done brilliantly and combined with many examples to help the readers understand its actual dimension with the protagonists of Amrita Narayanan's interviews. *Women's Sexuality and Modern India. In A Rapture of Distress* (2023) familiarises the readers with an intrinsic understanding of how sexuality intersects with other markers in a complex social and cultural context. As it stands, this book of well-researched but also profoundly personal chapters is a crucial addition to the domain of intersectional studies hinged on feminism and sexuality in India. Despite its complexity, it might be helpful to scholars and students interested in this topic.

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