

Middle Class Sexuality: Construction of Women's Sexual Desire in the 1990s and Early 21st Century Mumbai

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study seeks to understand how the media constructs women's sexuality through the codes of modernity, morality, and notions of what it means to be Indian in a globalising age. It also explores how women negotiate with the media, their urban environments, and their own lived experiences with regard to sexuality. The study is contextualised in relation to twenty-first century Mumbai.

The study specifically analyses three women's magazines: *Cosmopolitan*, *Femina* and *Woman's Era* since 1990 onwards and "reads" these as cultural texts that have insights to offer about how social norms and values are constructed. The magazines are analysed for their notions of normative womanhood and their engagement with issues of sexuality in the contemporary context. My readings suggest that each of these magazines circumscribes women's sexuality in different ways. *Cosmopolitan* appears to be creating a vision of a trans-national modernity, a world where women of a certain class across the globe, seek empowerment through careers and sexual expression. *Femina* envisions a pan Indian "woman of substance" who successfully balances the dual roles of working woman and super mum, managing to stay sexy at the same time. *Woman's Era* suggests that sex is something to be explored only within marriage even as it firmly endorses the sexual division of labour within a marriage as "natural." These are broad brushstroke impressions of the magazines for the purposes of the summary. The actual narratives are more nuanced and incorporate inherent contradictions.

What holds these varied texts together is that they are all prescriptive – each telling women how they should be the best you can be or be the woman of substance. The presence of these multiple voices suggests that there is no one way that is deemed to be appropriate. In a variety of different situations different kinds of class, caste, and regional contexts boundaries are drawn at different locations and have different meanings and pressures. I argue that what we need to do is encourage the growth of multiple voices, even those we disagree with. Only in an open-ended debate where multiple voices can participate can we seek a more liberatory media-tic encounter with sexuality.

I interviewed 17 women through a snowballing method. The group of women I spoke with were all educated and employed (or had been employed). Of these women, nine were married and eight were single. In religious terms 13 identified as Hindu, one as Muslim, one as Christian, one as Sikh and one as Jain. They were all between the ages of 20 and 40. All the women saw themselves as having choices in various aspects of their life such as education, career, marriage and lifestyles, and saw themselves as having consciously made decisions that had brought them to where they were.

Respondents, as women who wished to be considered as serious professionals, tended to distance themselves from women's magazines, though from their narratives they continued to be influenced by them to a greater or less extent. Negotiating sexuality as middle class women often means engaging with questions of morality as well as pressures to be sexy and sexual, that is, heterosexual. In relation to the regimes of beauty and fashion to a great extent women conform in the quest of sexual desirability but respondents also articulate contradictions that suggest that they are not passive objects and do not necessarily accept externally imposed boundaries. They both conform to and challenge notions of appropriate femininity. Women suggest that there are changing notions of morality but nonetheless it continues to be important to be respectable. For women being respectable is playacting the scripts of sexual femininity in public while making it

clear that private spaces cannot be transgressed. As professionals, the image that many respondents feel they have to strive for is that of someone who is competent yet feminine and who will not seek concessions to her gender but is yet not a feminist.

Most of the women articulate strong positive feelings of control and access to choice related to their incomes. While these choices are not necessarily liberatory by themselves, they do articulate the exercise of a certain agency linked to pleasure. It is important in a context where women are conditioned in the fine art of denial and sacrifice from a young age not to underestimate the potential power of pleasure to create in the future more radical choices. What women articulate is often a kind of corporate feminism – a concern with individual choices but not in ways that translate into political action or even see issues that are personal as political.

The media images of sexuality are certainly circumscribing but I would like to argue that their very presence creates a legitimacy for women to not just discuss sex but also to explore other avenues, even if they are linked to consumption, that might give them pleasure. I would like to argue that even as we seek a greater liberation that comes from women having real choices, it would be short-sighted not to recognise that in the short term we may be able to use all legitimisations of women's pleasure in subversive ways to finally make a case for a more open-ended sexuality that is not tied to the practices of consumption.

The study concludes by suggesting that among the reasons why feminism has not been able to intervene successfully in the area of sexuality is its refusal to engage with the "market." I argue that there is a need for feminism to engage with ideas of consumption and desire if we are to be able to speak to a large majority of women. I also argue that since many of the contemporary debates around sexuality are situated in the context of heterosexuality and particularly marriage, there is a need to reconsider the institution of marriage and ask if a feminist engagement with marriage is possible.