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The Politics of Fantasy

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Fantasies that don't sit so well with our politics, and yet here they are. Might this uncomfortable place where our fantasies and our politics seem to collide also be a productive one, precisely because it is uncomfortable. This is the question I would like to explore here. I write as a queer, kinky, feminist activist from within the women's movement in India. It is perhaps because of this location that I feel I am able to be part of the tradition of women's movement, at least here in India, and to be self-critical, often to the point of being overly critical of ourselves.

The way I am using the word fantasy is in terms of an expression or enactment of desire. And while we are all familiar with the concept of desire in its most overt form of sexual fantasies or imagined sexual scenarios, I believe that desire, and by implication, fantasy, also underpin our relation to reality in virtually every other domain of life – from relationships to career choices, from ideology to politics. I would like to begin with sexual fantasies and later move to fantasy as a dimension of other aspects of life.

A feminist friend whom I interviewed for a piece I was writing on porn told me about her porn-watching experience one night. The porn that she found herself looking for was very specific. It was about incest involving daughter and parents. All the regular porn sites she surfed seemed to be squeamish about this. They tended to do versions that were close, with "stepdaughter" or "stepfather," but not close enough to the kind of incest she wanted to see. And no, she clarified; the porn she wanted did not, could not, have kids as actors. When she did find what she was desperately looking for, she spoke about the peculiar excitement she felt at seeing the exact number of hits that the video had gotten. People like me, she thought.

Another feminist friend whom I interviewed enjoys reading what I learnt from her is called "reluctance porn." She explained why she was turned on by this kind of porn: "According primacy to unbridled desire (over and above the reluctance of someone) is very freeing. What appeals to me is not reluctance but the overcoming of it – to make sex about just unbridled desire is such a turn on." Speaking of how she felt about watching this kind of porn, she added: "I feel that there is an element of taboo in the very act of watching porn, which I haven't completely overcome. I do watch porn that I find mildly nauseating after I've orgasmed."

One could seek to reassure and respond by saying "it's OK," all fantasies are OK. But how to reconcile our darkest, most disturbing fantasies with our politics? I was co-facilitating a session on BDSM¹ with law students in a university in Delhi as part of the Kinky Collective,² a non-funded group that seeks to create awareness about BDSM in India. Many of the students were highly disturbed when we said that all sexual fantasies are OK, including rape fantasies. Rape fantasies, then, seemed to become the theme of the rest of the session. They were convinced that saying that such fantasies are OK,

¹ A combination of the abbreviations B/D (Bondage and Discipline), D/S (Dominance and submission), and S/M (Sadism and Masochism).

² For the BDSM community in India, the Kinky Collective runs an online group, organizes workshops, film festivals, and regular meetups where kink can be talked about safely. For raising awareness outside the community, it counters myths about kink and shares insights about consent through workshops, photo exhibitions, conferences, the media, as well as online through <http://kinkycollective.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/kinkycollective/>, <https://twitter.com/thekinkygroup>.

particularly in the public realm, will result in people crossing over the “thin line,” an expression used several times, from consent to consent violation. Moreover, rape fantasies are an expression of patriarchy, so how could we say they were OK?

We stressed that not only was it OK for a woman to have a rape fantasy, it was also OK for a man, or a person of any other gender, to have a rape fantasy, whether of raping or being raped. Second, sexual fantasies stem from the unconscious, which does not obey our ideas of what is politically correct and what is not. Third, not talking about such fantasies has not helped us so far. Rape culture still flourishes. Fourth, rape fantasy is a fantasy; it does not mean that one wants to be raped, or to commit rape. Otherwise, it would stop belonging to the realm of fantasies. We might want to enact a rape fantasy as part of play, but this is completely different from wanting the fantasy to come true in what is called our “real life” outside of the realm of the erotic. So I might want my rape fantasy to be enacted if I can find others who will consent to playing out that fantasy with me. This does not mean I want to be raped.

I am sharing the workshop discussion here in a fairly cut and dry manner, but there was a lot of back and forth, and the anxiety in the room was palpable. The arguments that we gave above were ones that we often discuss in the Kinky Collective workshops and seminars. However, there was one learning that came to us after the session when Sig, my friend and comrade from the Kinky Collective, and I were sitting and drinking a much needed cup of coffee in the fancy canteen-cum-lounge of the well-resourced university.

What hit us as novel in the interaction was this. Towards the end of the session, one of the students had asked how all fantasies can be OK when they are a product of social conditioning. And instead of repeating what we had already argued for a few times before, we realized that fantasies must be linked with the social as well as stemming from the unconscious. However, the link between fantasies and the social is not as simplistic as internalized patriarchy and social conditioning manifesting themselves in fantasies that may then be enacted in non-consensual ways. One of fantasies’ working with the social is that we fantasize about that which is impossible, illicit, or forbidden. More generally speaking, what society says is “not OK” is likely to be precisely the stuff of our fantasies. Taboos not only seek to limit desires; taboos create desires. “Prohibition eroticizes,” as one analyst has remarked.³

As we tried to make further sense of the OK and not OK discussion, it came to me that sitting and having coffee at a university canteen cannot be my fantasy (unless maybe I cannot afford it). But sitting naked and sipping my coffee at a university canteen might be a fantasy (although it is not), because that would be forbidden. To this, Sig said that for him, coming from a vegetarian Marwari⁴ family, eating chicken at the dining table at home might be a fantasy. The one time he secretly brought chicken home and was found out, the entire house was washed to be made to regain its purity.

We realized, then, that we must not fall into the trap of fantasies being a binary of OK vs. not OK. It is very likely that the content of fantasies are not OK, and it is precisely what society feels is not OK that

³ *Lacan on Love: An exploration of Lacan’s Seminar VIII, Transference* by Bruce Fink, Polity Press, 2015.

⁴ A “middle” level caste in India that was traditionally involved with business and trading.

we fantasize about. The point is that fantasies, like dreams, are what they are, regardless of why they are.

It is not just limited to what mainstream society considers to be taboo. I would argue that for feminists, what feminism considers to be taboo might also be hot for us – there is no simple relationship between our fantasies and our politics. Fantasies might not just be impervious to our politics; they might even sometimes act as a kind of rebellion against our politics, because, as I said above, one of the nature of desire is that we desire what is taboo. As feminists, we scoff at most taboos that mainstream society seeks to impose on us. So what could be hotter than to play with what feminism holds as taboo? Beyond challenging the binary of fantasies as OK vs. not OK, our hope as queer, kinky feminists is to play out our fantasies with the enthusiastic and mutual consent of other adults, and, at the very least, not judge ourselves and others about consensual acts.

I would now like to move to the word fantasy not as sexual fantasy, but as the dimension of the unconscious that informs all aspects of life. And it is at this point of transition that I would like to speak of the other binary that fantasy challenges – that between the yummy and the yucky.

I often experience within and around myself different versions of yummy/yucky-ness. Eyes watering, noses almost running, mouths making *si si* sounds but continuing to gulp down those really spicy puchkas.⁵ Being madly into that person whose politics are so bad. That going back again and again to the lover one is trying to leave. The horrible sort of joy in finding fault in oneself and in others, including in identifying political incorrectness in friends. Or being aware, perhaps, of a dimension of hotness in political leaders who one knows are criminals, and whom we hate with all our might. All rather yummy/yucky, no?

In my three plus years in psychoanalysis as an analysand, or client, as we are still referred to in India, I have been made to connect again and again with different kinds of yummy yuckyness. A learning that I feel is beginning to emerge, although at some cost to my fantasies and my finances too, is that one might be “getting off” on what appears to simply be one’s suffering. Yes, getting off, the same word that we might use for sexual arousal from fantasies, where we know this mixedupness abounds. Desire and disgust are bedfellows after all.

Challenging the binaries of fantasy being OK/not OK and of yucky/yummy leads to a breaking of the neat binary between fantasy and reality itself. Reality is always infused with fantasy. What we do/say/desire/aspire to has much more to do with the unconscious than we imagine.

I believe that the use of the term fantasy as the dimension of the unconscious is critical in most of our lived situations and in what is around us. For example, no matter how real our choice of romantic sexual partner appears to be, all attractions and relationships are fantasy-meets-fantasy. No wonder we might say to others, or at least would like to be able to say, “what in the world do you see in that person?” And we may well have had honest friends ask us the same. Who knows what we see in the

⁵ Puchkas or gol guppas are round, fried balls made with flour and filled with spicy water and other fillings depending on where in India one eats them.

other person? It rarely makes any sense. Why that person, or why, when in the face of all manner of good reasons we should exit the relationship, do we cling on to it for dear life? Why might the idea of getting married hold such sway over us even as we sincerely and passionately critique the institution of marriage? Why might jealousy surge through our veins like poison even as we might be deeply politically committed to polyamory? Why might it convert the most sorted out amongst us into sniffer dogs looking for clues to confirm our suspicions?

I am not suggesting that the dimension of fantasy at play in these situations is easy to figure out. My point is not that we understand what the dimension of fantasy at play is, but to recognize that there is a dimension of fantasy at play.

The phrase that I am using here is the dimension of fantasy, not fantasy per se. This is because there is much that we already know, including about love, marriage, monogamy, macro politics etc., that relate to material realities and ideologies linked with gender, class, caste, religion, sexuality, dis/ability, etc. What I am arguing for is the need to acknowledge that there is also a dimension of fantasy, of the unconscious, at play.

I would now like to bring together fantasy in both senses to argue why experiencing the power of fantasy, at times in a helpless kind of way, is a difficult but productive place to be. Acknowledging the dimension of fantasy will, I believe, strengthen us as feminists in many ways.

Firstly, talking about the Politics of Fantasy will, I hope, help a further unraveling of the feminist mantra, “the personal is political.” As my dear friend Apeksha Vohra pointed out to me, for us feminists, “personal is political” has worked more in one direction than the other. On the one hand, there is how the political has influenced the personal. And on the other, there is how the personal influences the political, which is the directional flow we need to explore much more.

Secondly, when our choices or desires seem to run counter to our politics, recognizing that there is also fantasy at play here, will help, I believe, lessen the angst and guilt that, in any case, never seem to help us behave or act differently. It can make us more compassionate, not just towards ourselves, but also towards other feminist friends and comrades. We know that being judgmental is detrimental solidarities. I do not, for a minute, mean this as a lowering of standards or a dilution of one’s politics. The struggles on the personal/political fronts, within and without, will continue. But I believe that we will come to these struggles from a different place.

Thirdly, a politics that is less judgmental and more accepting of the unconscious might also leave us more open to sexual fantasies which would otherwise remain repressed. Our politics might root us ethically, so that, with consent, we are able to play out fantasies that might appear to be completely at odds with our politics, such as those that disregard mutuality and dignity.

Fourthly, I believe that being in that not-so-in-control and not-so-rational space where fantasy collides with politics can challenge the overly rational framework of feminism (and that of all progressive ideologies). Yes, rational, despite emotion and affect. The awareness of the messiness within can help us connect with the messiness that we seek to understand and impact. This is core to what I am calling

the Politics of Fantasy. It can help us question whether we have the necessary conceptual resources or frameworks to fully understand the problem at hand and, following from it, whether we have the political strategies to effectively deal with it. In short, I am arguing for moving from a politics of certainty to a politics of doubt.

Last but not the least is the light that fantasies may shed on politics in the larger sense. I am thinking in particular about the widespread appeal of ideologies or leaders who might make our skin crawl. Our current framework of analysis tends to privilege factors such as political disillusionment, false propaganda, defence of privilege, ravaging economic changes, etc. And based on this analysis, we fight back with facts, more facts, more ideological arguments, which we know have not gotten us very far. Might adding the lens of fantasy and the unconscious help our macro political struggles too? If we connect with the ways in which our fantasies can drive us, take us over, perhaps it can help us see what supporters of political leaders who unabashedly promote bigotry might be getting off on. Might there be a collective fantasy at work? Might there be a fantasy of certitude at play? As Jacqueline Rose, a psychoanalytic feminist suggests, a critical element in the victory of Trump might be the illusion of certitude about gender and sexual roles – men are like this, women are like that.⁶ Might there be something in the larger-than-life-ness, the supreme confidence, the certainty, and the I-don't-give-a-damn persona which appeals to the unconscious? The Big Daddy, perhaps?

The lens of fantasy can also help us understand the hatred towards the Other. In his article “Recuperating Masculinity: Hindu Nationalism, Violence and the Exorcism of the Muslim ‘Other’,”⁷ Thomas Blom Hansen writes about how the Other is ascribed “an excessive enjoyment which steals our enjoyment and prevents us from fully enjoying our national way of life” (p. 150). The critical point here is not just that the Other is enjoying, but that his enjoyment is snatching away our enjoyment. This fantasy of us being deprived of our enjoyment is what gives the required erotic charge. Drawing upon the work of Slavoj Žižek, the psychoanalytic philosopher, Hansen writes, “The image of the strong and lustful other...is always characterized by the fascination of his excessive enjoyment. Communities always fantasize about the special and inaccessible ways in which the other enjoys life – how others, have more fun” (p. 151).

There is also the role of fantasy in the push towards religion-based extremist ideologies and organizations. As compared with others, the ground for the play of fantasy is rich. As Sudhir Kakar, the psychoanalyst and writer, reflects in his book *The Colours of Violence*,⁸ religion-based ideologies are more primordial, rich in symbols and myths, and more able to satisfy the search for meaning, in a world that seems to be meaningless.

We give supporters of authoritarian leaders and extremist ideologies all the facts and arguments we possibly can “but” their support is unmoved. Might this place of “but” help us understand the limits of “facts” that we offer them. And is it like the “but” that we repeatedly come up against in our own lives?

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/15/trump-disaster-modern-masculinity-sexual-nostalgian-oppressive-men-women>

⁷ “Recuperating Masculinity: Hindu Nationalism, Violence and the Exorcism of the Muslim ‘Other’” by Thomas Blom Hansen, *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol 16, Issue 2, pp. 137 – 172, 2016.

⁸ *The Colours of Violence* by Sudhir Kakar, Viking, 1995.

We might never get to the bottom of the “but.” However, its theoretical value lies in precisely being the place of rupture, where the divided nature of our subjectivity is on display. It is the point of transition from the explicable to the inexplicable, from the rational to the irrational. It holds the potential to connect us to that place of not sorted out-ness, of bewilderment, perhaps helplessness – a telling place to be. The point of “but” is usually the point of end of an argument. Might it be possible to make it the starting point of an exploration?

The exploration I hope might also include the question of whether what we seek, as feminists or as supporters of authoritarian leaders, is a sense of transcendence, beyond our individual aloneness and lostness, whether in the beloved, or in the political figure or ideology we love.