

## BOOK REVIEW

# Women navigating sexuality in contemporary India: A review of Amrita Narayanan's *Women's Sexuality and Modern India*

AASHNA VISWANATHAN

**Amrita Narayanan. *Women's Sexuality and Modern India: In a Rapture of Distress*. Oxford University Press, September 2023. 224 pages, Rs 1795/-, ISBN-13: 978-0192859815**

### Introduction

Contemporary discourses on women's sexuality have traversed from mute conversations to openly sharing sexual desires, pleasures and even discomfort. Sexual agency — the arousal of sexual excitement, the ability to freely act on it and seek sexual fulfilment — is deeply entrenched in the interests of the patriarchal society at large. In the censored world of the female erotic, Amrita Narayanan's exploration of "sexual memories" in *Women's Sexuality and Modern India: In a Rapture of Distress* navigates the intricacies of exercising women's desires and sexuality within a society that surveils sexual agency of "unfree female bodies" (p 3).

Narayanan's voyage into the sexual memories of twelve upper-caste, middle-class women, born between 1950 and 1990, highlights the contradictions in understanding, accepting, and fulfilling their erotic agency, whether they comply with or resist the patriarchal surveillance of their sexual desires. From 2011, through day-to-day conversations and interviews, Narayanan explores the emotional hurdles overcome in claiming their erotic agency where women live unequal lives in terms of expressing their bodily desires. Her approach to these sexual memories using a psychoanalytic framework seeks to understand the hurdles of cumulative trauma these women undergo to articulate, experience and attain their sexual agency.<sup>a</sup> Narayanan shifts the popular understanding

of sexual agency measured by outer behaviour to psychological measurement, probing into the psychological restraints on women's sexuality that lies in overt moral policing and unconscious self-policing ingrained in the early years of a child's life.

### Aesthetics of women's sexuality in India

Visual performance of what an "Indian woman" should look like has been intricately linked with regulating women's bodies and controlling their sexuality. The control of outer appearances regulated by patriarchal social institutions plays a crucial role in not only controlling women's bodies and their sexuality, but also in "protecting the nation" from its "anxious pleasures of Things English" (p 149). Nationalist ideologies, which according to Narayanan are essentially a "masculine enterprise"; campaign for the preservation of "Indianness" as distinct from anything that is encapsulated as foreign or "English". Narayanan claims that the patriarchal-nationalist groups' psychological organisation around women's bodies as undamaged symbols of "Mother India" unearths complex ties between women's sexuality, masculinity and the honour of the nation.

As a result of India's gradual movement towards psychological modernity, the displacement of patriarchal and nationalist ideologies, that is, women's performing of anything outside the duty-bound, sacrificing woman directly affects Indian masculinity. Hence, women's clothing and outer structures such as assertion of gender, caste and religion regulate a woman's performance of modernity and the performance of "Indianness". Women's sexuality has also been blurred by their global recognition as sexually oppressed. This sexual pity, a form of psychological misogyny, Narayanan claims, sheds light on the burden of being branded as sexually oppressed, further isolating women from agential aspects such as sex and love. The imposed identity of being sexually oppressed itself becomes oppressive, adding guilt and shame in conversations around women's sexual desires. When women's sexuality is tied to serving the purposes of nationalist ideologies, masculinities and their imposed identity of being sexually oppressed, how do they find a way to exercise their sexual curiosity? The psychoanalytical approach studying the conflict women experience between the imposed identities of the community and their lust for liberation from these internalised identities reflects India's position at the

Author: **Aashna Viswanathan** (aashnav98@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0194-1120>), PhD scholar at Manipal Centre for Humanities, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Karnataka 576104, INDIA.

To cite: Vishwanathan. Women navigating sexuality in contemporary India: A review of Amrita Narayanan's *Women's Sexuality and Modern India*. *Indian J Med Ethics*. Published online first on August 28, 2024. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2024.055

Manuscript Editor: Sanjay A Pai

Peer Reviewer: An anonymous reviewer

#### Copyright and license

© Indian Journal of Medical Ethics 2024: Open Access and Distributed under the Creative Commons license ([CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)), which permits only non-commercial and non-modified sharing in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

crossroads of preserving traditional ideals and global modernity.

### Double lives of women in India

While 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian women are mustering the courage to speak up about their sexuality, many women are caught between a transition from what Narayanan terms “a context-regulated emotional life to an autonomously regulated one” (p 150). Contemporary India’s juxtaposition of preserving traditions while simultaneously aspiring for global modernity results in regulation by external aspects such as clothes, appearances, class, and caste. Women’s engagement with modernity is likely to lead them to choose a double life to gain independence and assert their erotic agency. Narayanan in her book, questions the existence of women’s “war of psychological independence” — achieving and performing sexual agency whilst caught up in a dilemma between modernity and what entails “Indianness” (p 8).

Narayanan narrates the story of Shibani (b.1992), a professional architect who openly acts upon her sexual desires and agency while living away from her conservative Punjabi family. She recounts an incident where her ex-boyfriend displayed a violent declaration of his love and anger over the loss of their relationship, quickly escalating into a scene at a bar where several men came to her rescue. Her relish over a “dramatic display of possessive love” quickly turns into anxiety and fear over her parents getting the “wrong impression” about her misusing her freedom (p 22). Her shame is rooted in the presence of an older woman at the bar who witnesses the entire scene. Narayanan argues that Shibani’ has “imagined a loss of affection” from the elderly woman that is akin to losing the love of her family back in Haryana (p 22). This “imagined disapproval” of the woman Shibani perceived as a mother figure leads her to fall back on traditional, archaic values, hence causing her self-regulation to suppress her sexual desires (p 23).

At a micro level, the family becomes a site of the regulation of women’s sexuality and a looming reminder of their future caregiving roles. Shibani’s confused state of feeling excited over her desirability around men and yet, entangled in the controls of the nuclear family, poses a self-imposed threat to expression of suppression of her sexual desires. Despite the physical separation from her family, which allows Shibani to freely fulfil her sexuality without fear of judgment and abandonment by her family, yet the values and identity ingrained in her by her family cause her to be in an ever-present state of fear. Narayanan argues that this is because of the “attack of the self on the self” (p 23). These lingering symptoms of shame and fear of loss of family are the result of a conflict between the desire to achieve sexual liberation and the burden of fulfilling a generational identity that thrives on the rejection of sexual agency. However, when one is bereft of the perks of a higher class and caste, one may not have the privilege of living a double life. Narayanan’s excursion into the

sexual memories of the women only recognises narratives of women who carry “economic privilege” (p 2). How do women belonging to the oppressed classes and castes articulate their excitement and express their sexual desires living within the dynamics of a conservative, traditional Indian family? This is an area Narayanan does not explore.

### Pain: A site of oppression?

Narayanan also explores how some women find liberation from the guilt-ridden state of their imposed identity as Indian women. Narayanan’s interviews reveal that practising non-conformist sexual desires also acts as a way to navigate sexual pleasures and freedom from imposed identities. For instance, Neelam (b.1963) confides in Narayanan about her secret twenty-year affair with a man named Karan. Sex is painful, and even though Karan chooses the conditions of sex, Neelam finds pleasure in it even if the cost is violence (p 136).

Neelam, in this case, seeks pleasure and freedom from her dissatisfaction with her nuclear family in being dominated and seen as an object of pleasure. When violence has seeped into the pleasures of sex and results in walking a tightrope of pleasure and abuse, can we approach women’s sexuality and desires in the absence of violence? Women like Neelam find a coping mechanism in the sensory stimuli of pain during sex. The physical pain becomes a portal of relief from emotional stress and trauma — a temporary role-play of being free from the baggage that comes with the imposed identities/duties of a daughter, mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. However, when the pain is self-inflicted, how can we understand non-suicidal self-inflicted injury as a coping mechanism? Narayanan traverses the psychological dynamics of self-harm as a placeholder for oppressed desires chained by the generational prison of sexual regulation. For instance, Agni (b.1980), one of Narayanan’s patients, whose misdiagnosis of hysteria Narayanan questions, was caught in a generational rift of gender and sexual ethos (p 25). In the traditional dynamics of an Indian home, where her in-laws preserve the roles of gender and gender hierarchies, her misdiagnosed hysteria hinders her pursuit of sexual liberation.

Her anger stems from her need to please her sacrificing and domestic mother-in-law on the one hand, and the restrictions on her pursuit of a career, and her sexual dissatisfaction with her husband on the other. According to Narayanan, this hypersensitivity to the restrictions imposed on Agni may appear hysterical. Self-inflicted pain becomes not only a way to punish herself but also a coping mechanism for her oppression — a conflict between living up to the imposed identities of an obedient daughter-in-law and an aspiring career woman. The grief of losing her life’s aspirations, career and sexual fulfilment leads to violent outbursts against herself as the only means through which she could cope with her psychological distress.

## Conclusion

Amrita Narayanan, through her book, has ruptured the prevailing imagery of women as victims of violence that has overshadowed women's sexual agency and desire. While Narayanan's interviewees did not reveal any experiences of sexual abuse or harassment, can cumulative trauma be studied and understood in isolation from the trauma from experiences of sexual abuse? Can the dysfunction of the caregiver be a result of trauma from physical/sexual abuse, and if so, how will it affect their children facing cumulative trauma?

Narayanan's book shifts the way women are perceived as

sexual objects to agents of sexual desire — women actively partaking in fulfilling their sexual desires. In her quest to tell stories of sexual memories, of being sexual subjects and agents, Narayanan problematizes the idea of the "Indian woman" or what is encapsulated as "Indianness". The exploration of sexual memories equips her readers to further problematize sexual agency in gender and sexual identities that live under the conditions of inequality.

<sup>a</sup> **Note:** According to Masud Khan, "Cumulative trauma is what happens when, due to external events a parent is unable to play a psychologically protective role — that Khan called an auxiliary ego function — towards his or her child." (p 14)