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DECONSTRUCTION OF HOMOSEXUALITY AS A TABOO IN HETERONORMATIVE
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ABSTRACT

Taboo refers to those distinct courses or signs and codes existing within a culture that are given a special status of being something sacred, philosophical, and mystical. Taboos are enforced by social punishment which involves the attitudes and reactions of other members of society. This paper aims at the deconstruction of homosexuality as a taboo in heteronormative society in which the sexuality of an individual becomes the decisive feature in the construction of his identity in the society. By ruling out the politics behind the construction of homosexuality as a taboo, this paper tries to bring forth the actual formative influences which lay an impact on the construction of the sexuality of an individual.

Key Words: Taboos, Homosexuality, Heteronormativity, Queer, Queer Theory, Performativity, Fluidity.

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An important part of the representation of a society is the different social norms and taboos that govern its behaviour. The term "Taboo" is borrowed from the Tongan language and appears in many Polynesian cultures. In those cultures, a taboo often has specific religious associations. The word was brought back by Captain James Cook in 1777 after a long sea voyage to the South Seas and introduced into the English Language. "The word means simply to 'forbid' and can be applied to any sort of prohibition. Such prohibitions are present virtually in all societies" (Allan et al. 2). According to Freud, the word taboo has two different meanings. On one hand, it refers to something sacred, holy and on the other hand it means strange, dangerous, forbidden and uncovers the truth behind the construction of the sexual identities in the society. Also he states that anyone who violates a taboo himself becomes a taboo as it is feared that he can prompt others to commit the forbidden thing and for that reason he must be discarded.

A taboo is a strong social norm which is also an important aspect of social interaction. It may be referred to as a social prohibition relating to any area of human activity or social custom declared as sacred and forbidden; breaking of a taboo is usually considered objectionable by society. As the behaviour of an individual affects the behaviour of other members living in the society, so every time an individual's behaviour sets itself apart from an existing social norm, such an act lays an influence on the other members of society,

who may then punish the deviant individual. Some taboo activities or customs are prohibited under law and if one tries to cross such barriers, it may lead to severe penalties. Other taboos result in embarrassment, shame and unacceptability. Hence, "a taboo is a strong social norm that is also supported by severe socially imposed punishment" (Fershtman et al. 142).

A taboo is, therefore, a form of a guiding principle that governs not just our behaviour but also our thoughts. Taboo also refers to those distinct courses or signs and codes existing within a culture that are given a special status of being something sacred, philosophical, and mystical or sometimes even held to be unfaithful. Taboo may mean a state of being distinct or to put in other words set apart or sanctified to a special use or purpose. Taboo is putting of a person or thing under temporary or permanent exclusion or prohibition, especially as a social custom. The taboos existing in any society try to communicate the objects and actions that are significant for the social order. Thus, taboos belong to the general system of social control.

Taboos can include dietary restrictions (prohibition of cannibalism). In some societies, eating beef is a taboo; in others, eating pork is a taboo; while in many other societies, eating dog meat is a taboo. Numerous taboos relate to sexual activity, with many taboos common to most societies laying restrictions on sexual activities and relationships (inter-caste marriage, sex between people of the same sex, incest, animal-human sex, adult-child sex, and sex with the dead) and restrictions on the use of offensive language. Trade in human organs is another example of a common taboo. Some taboos may fade over time or even vanish, while others may become stronger and more central. No taboo is known to be universal, but some such as cannibalism and incest taboos occur in the majority of societies. Taboos may serve many functions and often remain in effect after the original reason behind them expires. So, taboos reveal the history of societies when other records are lacking.

Taboos regulate our sexual conduct, race relations, political institutions and economic mechanisms. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, taboos are "the prohibition of an action or the use of an object based on ritualistic distinctions of them either as being sacred and sanctified or as being dangerous and unclean". The human behavior is not just guided by the rational decision making, but several other factors too. Societies often have shared values and standards of acceptable behavior that members of the society are encouraged to follow. A culture or society guides the behavior and the thoughts of their members by agreeing upon expectations and rules. This list of behavioral guidelines is usually referred to as social norms and taboos. These norms and taboos have a huge effect on our lives. The ways we behave, dress, eat and drive, as well as our sex life, are all governed by the norms and taboos of the societies we belong to.

The list of taboos and their importance may change over time. The strength of a taboo is determined by social interaction among individuals. Those who consider deviating from a taboo contribute to its weakening. The role of taboos formalizes the way people behave, their thinking patterns and the choice of identity in societies. Behaving in a manner that violates the taboo is risky. Taboos are enforced by social punishment. The most familiar social punishment involves the attitudes and reactions of other members of society. Taboos are an important part of any social identity. "Adopting a certain identity implies accepting the taboos and the social norms associated with this identity. The desire to maintain this identity and to view oneself as a moral person is an important consideration that defines the self-inflicted cost of thinking about violating a taboo" (Fershtman et al. 144). Some taboos are prohibited under the law, and transgressions may lead to severe punishment for example; there are laws against underage sex, pornography etc. The strictness of the punishment is positively related to the strength of taboo. Individuals may differ with respect to their social concerns and the harshness that they associate with social punishment. At the same time the strength of a taboo is determined by the percentage of individuals that follow it.

Foucault in *History of Sexuality* claims that in order to gain the supremacy and repress the concept of sex, it was dominated at the level of language, its free use in speech was controlled and the words which one way or the other pointed towards it were declined. So, there was interplay of restrictions imposed upon the matter of sex which gave rise to censorship. There was screening of words, statements and also the places and relations were defined which decided where to use these words and with whom. Alongwith this, there was an increase in number of discourses related to sex which differed from one another in many ways. This increase in

the discourses was itself the exercise of power which asked the subjects to talk about it through different modes. In order to deal with sex, power uses the law of prohibition and the objective behind this prohibition is that sex renounces itself. The tool used to meet this objective is the threat of punishment which leads to suppression of sex. Regarding this role of power in the suppression of sex, Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* claims "Power constrains sex only through a taboo" (82). Power forms the laws regarding sex which are observed for maintaining its supremacy over the sexual discourse. "Sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden" (81). Thus, it is power which results in making sex a forbidden and illicit affair which in turn reduces the sexual matters to the status of a taboo or in other words something secret and not to be talked about freely.

Another important element in the formation of sexual taboos is repression. Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* opines that repression has been the fundamental link between power, knowledge and sexuality since the classical age. Foucault further states that at the beginning of seventeenth century the matters of sexuality were looked upon with an open mind and there was no hiding about or any secrecy related to it. With the coming of the Victorian age there was a huge shift in the sensibilities and it was considered to be a taboo to talk about the matters of sex and strict rules were also enforced as it was nothing less than a crime. Conjugal love got sanction and remained confined just to home. All this, according to Foucault paved the way to repression. "Repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of non-existence and an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know"(8). Thus, it becomes very clear that power is exercised over sex according to the mechanisms of law, taboo and censorship working at different levels in different institutions. A kind of secrecy is always present to mask the power play over the dominated subjects, as without it they would not accept the limits imposed upon their freedom by power. So, ultimately the power structures and repression are the main working principles behind the formation of taboos.

In modern society, Taboo refers to disapproved behaviours in a society. Taboos are established because people believe that such inappropriateness will bring harmful consequences to them and it thus violates the moral code of the society. Society becomes progressively more tolerant towards a taboo as people continue to violate it. Today's media serves as an almost limitless supply of things which were formerly taboos. Taboos are constructed as a system of representation i.e. what is good and bad in the society. Taboos define and produce the objects of our knowledge. These taboos influence us how ideas are put into practice. Taboos gradually become the compulsion of custom and tradition and finally of the law.

Homosexuality is considered as a taboo in heteronormative society. The term homosexuality, invented by a Swiss doctor in 1869, is generally used to name and describe a person who has sexual feelings towards the same sex individuals as opposed to the existing norms of love for the opposite sex. *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines homosexuality as "relating to or characterised by a tendency to direct sexual desire towards another of the same sex". Even today heterosexuality is considered to be the deciding norm which decides the identity of an individual. Those who adhere to this norm are considered to be normal while the others are considered to be the others or not normal. Gender and sexuality are still the factors which are of utmost importance in the maintenance of the binary gender system present in our heteronormative society. Gender and sexuality still function as normative and binary cultural systems in our social reality. Every individual; his identity, his personality and everything he does or the way in which he acts; are all decided by the norms of gender and sexuality. Various heteronormative discourses are employed in order to maintain the gender binary. Indian society is homophobic society where the same sex love is seen with an eye of contempt and there exists a certain kind of hatred for the same sex love. Homosexuality is not discussed openly as talking about sex is still a major prohibition.

The history of homosexuality is quite old as it is present in our society for such a long time or we can say it always has existed in our society but not definitely in the same form as is present now. Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* claims that "in the later nineteenth century, sexual acts between men were no longer seen as incidental to their lives . . . that anyone might engage in under certain circumstances, but as expressions of their identity" (qtd. Bertens 224). It is assumed that each person has only one sex i.e. either male or female and

one gender i.e. masculinity or femininity and they are fixed for life. Our sexuality thus is either homosexual or heterosexual. Thus we are men or women, masculine or feminine, gay or straight. All of these are social constructions. The term sexuality is very often understood in very wrong terms and is taken to be the inclination of an individual towards the partner of other sex. Foucault describes sexuality as "something that we ourselves create, it is our own creation and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire" (Foucault 1994: 163). So we can say that sexuality is not something to be decided by the normative values of the society but depends on the desires we have whether towards the same sex or the other. Hence, heteronormativity should not be taken as the deciding norm for the sexuality of an individual. "Sexual behaviour is the consciousness one has of what one is doing, what one makes of the experience and the value one attaches to it"(Foucault 1994: 142). Sexuality, thus, can be seen as a social construction in order to maintain its supremacy or control. "Regarding the social construction of sexuality Mary Mackintosh in her famous essay, *The Homosexual Role*, argues that "society constructed itself as pure and safe by labelling some persons as 'deviant' and criminal. The label was thus a form of social control that assumed some people were naturally deviant"(qtd. Nayar 187).

The production of homosexuality led to its codification in legal, medical, psychological and religious discourses. It led to the fixation of identities (homosexual, heterosexual) and the surveillance of the border between them. In other words, this production of homosexuality is ultimately connected with power. Just like other sexual identities, homosexuality is a result and instrument of power's design (Foucault 1978:43). Thus, the creation of homosexuality can be attributed to a large extent to the existing power structure which through different ways which includes legal, educational, religious discourses etc. creates fixed identities of homosexual and heterosexual. Thus one category was legalized and made authentic i.e. the heterosexuals and on the other hand the second category was pronounced as illegal and deviant.

In order to deconstruct this politics acting behind the construction of sexuality as the decisive element in the production of identity of an individual and the reduction of marginal sexualities to the status of taboo, Queer theory plays a very pivotal role. The word 'Queer' is meant to denote the whole range of sexualities other than heterosexual i.e. Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual etc. The phrase "Queer Theory" was coined by Teresa de Lauretis to describe a school of thought that studies sexual distinctiveness, human sexuality, and gender. Queer theory aims at the deconstruction of the sexual binaries namely male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, masculine/ feminine etc. It deconstructs the social construction of gender and sexuality. It provides resistance against the different strategies employed in the production of different sexual categories and constructing them as the social identities. These binary oppositions represent a large number of complicated social processes. Queer theory focuses on those categories which stand outside these binaries and are supposed to be not suitable to fit in the normative alignment of sex, gender and sexuality. Queer theory insists that all sexual behaviours, all the concepts which link the sexual behaviours to sexual identities, and all the categories of normative and deviant sexualities are nothing more than the social constructs which produce certain types of social meaning.

Queer theory mostly draws its ideas from Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. According to Foucault, sexuality is just a social construct and has been turned into a discourse which in turn is used to exercise control and maintain the power structure. We have to follow these rules laid down by the governing power or else we are considered to be deviants. Tracing back the history of sexuality, Foucault argues that homosexuality was born in 1870's. With this he means that in earlier times homosexuality was taken to be normal and not considered to be a crime. It was considered to be the behaviour of an individual instead of his identity. He further claims that individuals are not stable entities but they are formed through different discursive processes. Foucault further says that bisexuality is present in society from the very early period. It even existed in Greek period where it was not considered to be an offence. In chapter "A Problematic Relationship" of *History of Sexuality* Foucault brings out this tendency of bisexuality as:

The way in which they conceived of this dual practice, we need to take note of the fact that they did not recognize two kinds of "desire", two different or competing "drives", each claiming a share of men's hearts' or appetites. We can talk about their bisexuality, thinking of the free choice they

allowed themselves between the two sexes, but for them this option was not referred to dual, ambivalent and bisexual structures of desire. To their way of thinking, what made it possible to desire a man or woman was simply the appetite that nature had implanted in man's heart for beautiful human beings whatever their sex might be (Foucault 1990: 188).

Thus, bisexuality was not considered to be something different but just as a desire for both the sexes which was considered to be natural. Moving further, Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* traces the evolution of sexuality into a discourse of oppression through different ages. For the Greeks, as Foucault states, the intensity of sexual act whether it be moderate or severe, control over lust and the moral self were given more importance rather than the interest in the sexual preferences of the individuals, whether men have relationship with women or other men. He says that: "what differentiates men from one another...is not so much the type of objects towards which they are oriented, nor the mode of sexual practice they prefer; above all, it is the intensity of that practice" (Foucault 1990: 44).

Foucault dates back the birth of homosexuality to the nineteenth century. Before this homosexuality was considered to be the behaviour of an individual and was not categorized as a crime and identity of an individual like the present times. "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul" (Foucault 1990: 43). Homosexuality was considered to be a normal thing to happen, but in the nineteenth century, homosexuality was tagged as a crime and homosexuals were considered to be a different species to be looked upon with contempt.

Foucault further regards Power as the main reason behind the creation of homosexuality as a separate and deviant category. Power makes the laws for sexes which are observed for maintaining power over sexual discourse. "Sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden" (Foucault 1990: 81). This creation of homosexuality further resulted in the formation of different identities on the basis of sexuality i.e. the homosexuals or the deviant ones and the heterosexuals or the normal ones. It is the power structures existing in the society who decide what is good and bad, legal and illegal and the rules are formulated in accordance to their own interests. For this purpose they use law, which itself is based on the heteronormative structures of society. Law is imposed on individuals with the fear of punishment. Thus Law itself becomes helpful in imposing control by different power structures. But Foucault doesn't see power as an all existing force behind the formation of sexual identities, but also the repetitive performance as another important factor acting behind it.

According to Foucault, the construction of sexuality is constituted on the three important factors which include the knowledge about sexual behaviour, system of power which regulate the practice of sexual acts and finally "the forms within which individuals are able, are obliged, to recognize themselves as subjects of this sexuality" (Foucault 1990: 4). Thus we can say that the power in play not only makes people accept the prescribed rules but also makes them believe that they are natural and should be accepted. This is partially done by making some things sinful and equating them as crime while making the others acceptable. Homosexuality has also been termed as a sin by these normative values of the society which further leads to the classification of homosexuals as deviants or criminals.

The work of American critic Judith Butler is of much use and offers an insight into the performative nature of the identities. For Butler, the notions of identity are quite varied as compared to the normative values and describe the role of identity categories as: "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (Butler 14). Thus, the categorization of the sexual identities of an individual is meant for the oppression of the masses by the existing power structures. By doing so, the heteronormative structures maintain their supremacy by making heterosexuality as right and homosexuality as wrong, by creating this binary opposition of good and bad.

Butler puts that there is no such thing as the identity; it is just the repeated performance of certain acts which creates an illusion of a unified identity and results in the creation of the coherent identity effect. So, if our identities are the result of the continuous performance of certain acts then heterosexuality can also be

regarded as the outcome of several repetitive acts or performances and is not inborn. Butler states that "gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (Butler 25). This means that the roles in the society are pre-decided and we have to fit in those roles. We often have an illusion that we are making the preferences with our own will, but that's not true as they have already been decided in the society by the power structures.

Thus, the sexual identities of individuals as homosexual and heterosexual are just the repetition of certain acts. The power structures try to validate heterosexuality as genuine and original form of sexuality and makes homosexuality as inauthentic and immoral. In order to gain acceptance and recommendation in the society, heterosexuality needs to create a binary opposite of homosexuality. In the homophobic society, heterosexuality is placed in the centre and other sexualities are reduced to the margins. So, homosexuality requires the non-heterosexual identities and activities to validate and make it acceptable in society.

Another critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has produced pioneering work in the field of gender studies, especially in Queer theory. Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet* argues about the fluid nature of identity. She argues that revealing one's gay or lesbian sexual orientation is very important in order to provide equal rights to all sexualities. The sexual orientation of an individual should not be used to make an individual acceptable or unacceptable in the society. She goes further to say that identity of an individual is a mixture of many factors like social position, professional roles, rather than any fixed inner essence.

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