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NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: SHOBHA DE'S DISCOURSE OF THE 'PERSONAL AS POLITICAL'

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> Different strengths we respect. Not weakness.
> What is the use in not actively engaging life?
> It passes anyhow.
>
> -- Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Since the 1960s Feminists have strategically upheld the notion that the 'personal is political'. The conviction is still valid for various reasons. First, mainstream politics, until recently, has not deemed issues related to female sexuality fit for discussion and debate in the public sphere. Secondly, for many feminists mainstream political activity has been successful in excluding most of the pressing problems facing women by treating them as inconsequential and insignificant. Finally, the phrase 'the personal is political' has political resonance precisely because most of the shortcomings ascribed to women have, in fact, come to be recognised as structural rather than biological or cultural. Foucault has particularly shown a concern to redefine the scope of the personal as political and thus initiate a debate in the public sphere. He remarks:

> To say that everything is political is to recognise the omnipresence of relations of force and their immanence to a political field; but it is to set oneself the barely sketched task of unravelling this indefinite tangled skein. (Foucault, 1979b: 72)

This recognition of the 'personal as political' has spurred radical Feminist theorists to analyse structural relations, and the way that women as individuals and as members of groups negotiate relations of power. Recent feminist work has moved away from viewing women as simply an oppressed group, as victims of male domination, and has tried to formulate ways of analysing power as it manifests itself and as it is resisted in the relations of everyday life. An important aspect of the unequal power relations is the politics of sexuality which hinders women from actualising their sexual self by objectifying and dehumanising the female body.

Sexual objectification of females serves two very important functions: first, it keeps hegemonic male sexuality safe from resistance; secondly, it does not allow the female sexuality debate to be problematised. Sexuality is thus polarized as active male and passive female wherein the controlling male gaze is projected onto the female body as an object of scrutiny and consumption.

Conditioned by hegemonic ideologies women treat sexuality as unimportant, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems. But it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become fascinated by the problems of female sexuality. Contemporary conflicts over sexual values and erotic conduct have much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries. They acquire immense symbolic weight. Disputes over sexual behaviour often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity. Consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress. The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political manoeuvre, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. But there are also historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated. A radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression. Such a theory needs refined conceptual tools which can grasp the subject and hold it in view. It must build rich descriptions of sexuality as it exists in society and history. It requires a convincing critical language that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution. Several persistent features of thought about sex inhibit the development of such a theory. These assumptions are so pervasive in our culture that they are rarely questioned. Thus, they tend to reappear in different political contexts, acquiring new rhetorical expressions but reproducing fundamental axioms. One such axiom is sexual essentialism – the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions. Sexual essentialism is embedded in the folk wisdoms of our societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical. Dominated for over a century by medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, the academic study of sex has reproduced essentialism. These fields classify sex as a property of individuals. It may reside in their hormones or their psyches. It may be construed as physiological or psychological. But within these ethno-scientific categories, sexuality has no history and no significant social determinants. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* has been the most influential and emblematic text of the new scholarship on sex. Foucault criticises the traditional understanding of sexuality as a natural libido yearning to break free of social constraint. He

argues that desires are not pre-existing biological entities, but rather that they are constituted in the course of historically specific social practices. He emphasizes the generative aspects of the social organization of sex rather than its repressive elements by pointing out that new sexualities are constantly produced. And he points to a major discontinuity between kinship-based systems of sexuality and more modern forms.

Sexual life, including identities, relationships, practices and desires, is often expected to fit within categories. Whether these categories are imagined to be 'natural' or socially constructed, they are also often regarded necessary. According to this imagining, categories provide the map by which people make sense of their experiences and desires, and even of their very selves. However, as I demonstrated in the previous sections, the production of this map is far from democratic. Women and their sexual lives are contained, through shame and representation, within the borders of sexual state-forms by processes of categorisation that supposedly encompass all possibilities. Furthermore, all possibilities are then judged in terms of those state-forms. Sexual orientation is the product of overlapping state-forms. More nuanced arguments advocating the benefits of sexual orientation categories also address their limitations, acknowledging some of the problems caused by categorisation. Much as the State-form is often argued to be a necessary evil, so remapping sexual identities may be seen as the best possible strategy.

In this paper, I assess the ways in which De's women evade sexual state-forms, instead participating in the production of sexual nomadism, thus politicising the personal. Not ruled by the borders of state-forms, the nomadism of these people's lives demonstrates the practice of resisting orientation. First, I examine the anarchist politics adopted by De's women to unsettle phallomasochistic orientation and (re)visionary sexuality politics and the tactics they develop for evading the constraints they so often entail; Second, I look at how these women manage to reclaim the female body from the heterosexixt enclosures through a phased (re)discovery of a female imaginary; and third, in a series of extended analyses, I document how the concepts of 'desire', 'gender' and 'sexual practice' are each potentially nomadic spaces in themselves which help the new woman deconstruct the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness.

De's strategic entry into the forbidden and heavily policed zone of sexuality can be seen as a response to the French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous who asserted that "about everything is yet to be written by women about their femininity," including their sexuality in its infinite complexity, their eroticization, and the adventures of their sexual drives (*Laugh* 342). Just as symbolic discourse has fragmented women's bodies, the patriarchal tradition has engaged in the limitation and derision of women's sexuality. Similarly, Luce Irigaray discusses how women's sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters (*This Sex* 23). In this figuration, the clitoris is "conceived

as a little penis" and the vagina is "valued for the "lodging" it offers the male organ" (*This Sex* 23). Women's erogenous zones are thus viewed as subordinate to the "noble phallic organ": in contrast to the male phallus, women sexual organs represent lack, atrophy, penis envy, absence of form, and "the horror of nothing to see" (*This Sex* 23, 26). Because the vagina and the clitoris, in particular, are viewed as inferior, women's orgasms are metonymically assumed to be weaker and limited as well. Not only is woman's sexual capacity viewed as inferior to man's, but woman's sexuality carries the stigma of shame and sin in most religious traditions. In De's *Snapshots* Aparna always has a problem with her sexuality, which results from her phallomasochistic conditioning. Repression breeds guilt which is built in her:

> Aparna had grown up with shame. Shame about her body. Shame about her adolescent looks. Shame about her background. Shame about practically every aspect of her life. It was the environment she was raised in. Guilt was its defining feature. She couldn't recall a time when she wasn't made to feel acutely conscious of every small pleasure – emotional or physical. (6)

Kristeva explains the problem saying that women are only associated with the symbolic community in the Christian tradition provided they keep their virginity or atone for their *jouissance* with their martyrdom (qtd. in Moi 145-6). Marriage does not offer an easement on this sanction, as sex within marriage was initially intended for pro-creational purposes only (146). Though Western society has largely broken away from the Judeo-Christian tradition in a religious sense, these mores still pervade modern society. Kristeva asserts that part of the collapse of the symbolic order lies in women denying identification with the father/phallus and learning to identify with the mother/vaginal body, at which point women and their *jouissance* move from being repressed to sublimated (150). De's writing is dedicated to women and their *jouissance*, containing provocative explorations of love and pleasure which are always centred on the vaginal body.

De's narratives attack the idea of the tradition of marriage being a holy institution which offers women the only appropriate sphere for their sexual activity, relegating extra-marital sex to the arena of inner defilement. In most of her novels women consequentially turn to relationships outside of their marriages for emotional and sexual fulfilment. The beauty and intensity of their love affairs, which De describes as immensely fulfilling, are a foil to their empty marriages. With this inversion, these women's passionate extra-marital relationships, or "fornication" and "adultery", become sacred, while marriage is illustrated as anything but a holy sacrament of mutual love and respect. Rather than being defiled and ashamed, De's women experience freedom, pleasure, and joy. De highlights the fallibility of believing simply that marriage is good and pure, and that sexual acts outside of marriage are evil and sinful; her configuration of erotic love resists these hierarchical binaries. She does

not, however, assert that all sexual encounters are sacred, only those that occur in a relationship characterized by true love. For an engaging point of departure for examining De's depictions of pleasure we can turn to Irigaray, who envisions an erotic love that transcends hierarchical power structures which leave one partner dominated by the other. Irigaray states in *This Sex*, "when you say I love you – staying right here, close to you, close to me – you're saying I love myself" (*This Sex* 206). This is a love of proximity and equality, not distance and opposition: I/you is collapsed into a body "shared, undivided" where neither "you" nor "I" is severed (*This Sex* 206). Irigaray's ideal vision of erotic love is "two lips kissing two lips" (*This Sex* 210). By eliminating the phallus from this vision of sexual intercourse, she removes the object of penetration and difference. "Kiss me," she writes, "Openness is ours again. Our 'world.' And the passage between us is limitless, without end. No knot or loop, no mouth ever stops our exchanges. Between us the house has no wall, the clearing no enclosure, language no circularity" (*This Sex* 210). The act of love becomes a form of open communication where "several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly back and forth" (*This Sex* 209). The active phallus/passive vagina binary is transcended in this vision, where the lips remain open in a mirror image. For example, Irigaray notes that women's "horizon will never stop expanding . . . stretching out, never ceasing to unfold"; Cixous asserts that woman is "a cosmos where eros never stops traveling, a vast astral space"; and Kristeva writes that women's experience and bodily rhythms are aligned with "cosmic time" versus the linear, or "monumental" temporality of the symbolic order (Irigaray, *This Sex* 213; Cixous, *Sorties* 87; Kristeva 191). Similarly, by presenting female sexuality as plural and never-ending, De also forcefully transcends the borders that have been constructed to limit female sexuality.

The undoing of sexuality politics and rediscovering of women's sexual identity is closely allied with the notion of the reclaiming of female body. However, the reclamation of their body has to pass through a process of resistance to and subversion of heterosexist apparatuses of control. Fear of sexual violence and body shame are two of the most effective weapons by which men have exerted tremendous power over women through ages. By reducing and essentialising women to the sum of their sexual parts – a fetishising move – they come to be known as 'freakish' sexual object and their sexual differences are 'naturalized' within the heterosexist discourse. Stripped of its humanistic qualities the female body is subjected to sexual invasion by men (through compulsory heterosexuality), sexual violence (through rape, battery and physical mutilations) and sexual colonization (through a dehumanizing and controlling gaze). The sexually colonized female body is exposed to the heterosexist scopic gaze in which the construction of a hyperbolic sexuality is discursively produced within a visual framework.

Historically, women's bodies have been a territory appropriated by men for their own sexual pleasure and aesthetic appreciation. The female body has consistently held a special function in the symbolic realm of literature, both as a dismembered and fetishized object of the heterosexist gaze and as the postmodern theoretical figuration of gaps and holes in discourse, or a feminized "space of dispersion" (Salvaggio 271). In each case, the female figure functions as an entity to be manipulated by men for their own impressions, robbing women of their subjectivity. In recent decades feminist theorists and writers have dedicated much of their work to re-appropriating both the female body and women's sexuality. Julia Kristeva describes how a new generation of female writers have begun to display the female body in ways which challenge its "careful disguise" by patriarchal culture: "they invite us to see, touch, and smell a body made of organs" (qtd. in Sellers 111). These women draw attention to the fact that women's bodies, for all of their metaphorical utilizations by men, have rarely been explored in a natural, organic sense. Hélène Cixous asserts that there is an opportunity for a new type of writing that will "give [woman] back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories that have been kept under seal" (*Laugh* 338). For Cixous, much of the exploration of women's bodies needs to occur in the sexual arena. Referencing female sexual organs, Cixous encourages explorations of the bodily territory by women: "trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright" (*Laugh* 342). Luce Irigaray echoes this call, noting that for a long time men "have appreciated what [women's] suppleness is worth for their own embraces," and that it is time for women to learn to enjoy their bodies for their own pleasure (*This Sex* 216). Throughout this project I have discuss how Shobha De takes on the formidable project of reclaiming the female body from literary, medical, cultural, and scientific discourse; sublimating women's *jouissance;* configuring love as a transformative space that contains aspects of both abjection and redemption; and producing non-instrumentalised bodies as a resistant action.

The emergence of new woman is premised on women's undoing of sexuality politics and the reclamation of their bodies from the heterosexist enclosures. De's new woman's Refusal to cooperate with the two-gendered system can be seen as a radically resistant action played out variously by rediscovered sexualities and reclaimed bodies. De suggests that all bodies could thus become resistant bodies and they would render gender laughable and obsolete in its frigidity and instrumentality. De illustrates the invasive nature of new woman's sexuality by describing it in strong, often abject language. In one instance, Swati (De's spokesperson?) candidly remarks:

> Sex isn't filthy,... our minds make it so. Look at khajuraho, Konark... have any of you studied the Kama Sutra? Fascinating. It's a pity we got brainwashed by some

> frustrated, repressed idiots. I think sex is a celebration – the highest form of religion. (*Snapshots* 164)

These images illustrate De's ideas that sex should not be a passive act, but a venture which demands the complete engagement of one's mind, body, and soul. By opening oneself so fully to another person, one inevitably faces the pain of renunciation of the ego, as well as the threat of harm that is implicit to vulnerability. De has created a vision of sexuate discourse that literally transcends the body's corporeal borders, as the skin is, significantly, the body's envelope and territorial boundary. This transgression of boundaries notably creates a new "meaning" of life for the new woman, thus yielding a transformation of self. It is significant that this language of longing is not impressed on an inferior body by a dominant body, but is rather exacted upon each side respectively. Instead of one sex/gender inflicting harm on the other, it is as if the sexes are grafting themselves into one body: the ultimate border crossing. The complete transgression of bodily limits is highlighted by De in *Starry Nights* through Asha Rani's proclamation that,

> For a while they didn't say anything... Then Linda began caressing Asha Rani gently and kissing her fingertips. "THIS is love, understand? This is love-making, not what those bastards do to our bodies." Asha Rani ... thought this is what it should be, tender, beautifur, and erotic. In a way it could never be with a man. (79-80)

This conflation of lovers into one being illustrates Irigaray's ideal vision of sexual relations; there is no other in this relationship, only one body of love. Echoing Irigaray's ideal of oneness in love, De suggests that the recognition of one's self within one's lover is, notably, the antithesis of Kristevan abjection, where "nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory," and which "is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin" (Kristeva 5). Thus, although De recognizes the abject capacity of passion, she ultimately views love as the most elevated state a human can attain. The opposite of the separation and dejection of abjection, true love results in an intense, invigorating union of mind, body, and soul. De believes that individuals have the ability to alter their relationship to the symbolic order, and that women thus have the power to move into a position of equality with men.

Art plays a fundamental role in the realization of this cultural revolution for De, who finds "enormous power" in the agency of literature, which she believes "is like a secret lover she has hide from her family. Steal time to go back to. Dream about. Luxuriate in. Fantasize about. ... The book makes you feel desirable, sexy, beautiful, interesting. It's better than the best sex (*Memory* 2)." Her novels are a testament to the self-reflexive experience that the best writing provides, insisting that her reader question their identity, sexuality, and the entire social order. With her novels De wades through the symbolically constructed borders which surround sex, gender, and the body. By subverting the tradition of fetishising and fragmenting

the female body via scientific, medical, and literary discourse, De provides her female characters the autonomous subjectivity that women have historically been denied - one that is not predicated on man's impressions. Her vision of erotic love transcends the hierarchical binaries of man/woman, dominant/inferior, lover/beloved, symbolic/abject, and sinful/righteous that have long pervaded sexual discourses. Without the division and oppression implicit in these oppositions, love becomes a holy and transformative union. Finally, De's unashamed hymn to women's *jouissance* defies the culture of shame and subordination that surrounds female sexuality.

From the critical discussions in the foregone passages we can derive that as nonphallic beings; women are defined as submissive, passive, and virtually inert. For all of patriarchal history, women have been defined by law, custom, and habit as inferior because of their nonphallic bodies. Their sexual definition is one of 'masochistic passivity' and their personality structures 'submissive-passive', or female. This needs to be destroyed completely and forever. Women must excise them from their social fabric, destroy any and all institutions based on their incapability render them vestigial, useless. In order to change, they must renounce every male definition they have ever learned; they must renounce male definitions and descriptions of their lives, their bodies, their needs, their wants, their worth—they must take for themselves the power of naming. They must refuse to be complicit in a sexual-social system that is built on their labour as an inferior slave class. They must unlearn the passivity they have been trained to over thousands of years.

Shobha De's candid remarks about the importance of sexuality in the lives of women need to be seen as groundbreaking. She remarks, "the very fact that sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three-letter word in India, is enough cause to celebrate" (*Liaisons* 41). What does sexuality have to do with women's empowerment? Sexuality affects women's cultural, political and economic empowerment in a number of important ways. De suggests that if we look at women's empowerment through a sexuality lens, we can see a more complete and realistic picture of a woman: not a victim, nor an end-product 'empowered' woman, but a woman with a complex and changing life. We see a woman, whose well-being depends, among other things, on making choices about her own body, about pleasure and about her own sexuality. We also see a woman who lives within or perhaps challenges the confines of social pressure and expectations about her behaviour. A woman's sexuality and identity can affect many aspects of her life including her work and her means to earn a living, her family relations, her ability to move around in public, her opportunities to participate in formal and informal politics, and her access to education. Looking through a sexuality lens adds something very valuable to our efforts to promote women's 'personal as political'.

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