

Feminists Reading of Foucault's Theory of Sexuality and Power

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Abstract

Sexuality is a normal and healthy part of human lives, normally and naturally, human is a sexual being and sexuality is viewed as a person's capacity for sexual interests and feelings. Similarly, sexuality is shaped and regulated by various determining factors such as social, political, cultural, legal, biological, psychological, spiritual, historical and so on which varies across societies and cultures. Sexuality is a broader idea which has various theoretical explanations and unbending social arrangements and comprises much more than sexual intercourse. On top of it, there is no single narrative which is globally accepted, various debates and discourses are more vigorous in the context of power, sexuality and feminism. Many theoreticians, researchers and practitioners have looked upon instances of homosexual, intersexual or non-hetero births as problems for the binary model that they have identified of power and sexuality. We consider power and sexuality to be distinct hitherto closely attached categories and yet it is a dynamics of power and mechanism of social control. Foucault has emphasized the role of discourses of ideas in constructing and regulating human sexuality and prevailing patriarchal order. Basically, this paper explores some conceptual and theoretical dialogues concerning sexuality, power and feminist narrative. In this context, the aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between feminist standpoints of gender and sexuality and Foucault's ideas of sexuality and power.

Keywords: Sexuality, Power, Patriarchy, Feminism.

Notion and Construction of Sexuality

The term 'human sexuality' refers to people's sexual curiosity and attention as well as attraction to others, with their aptitude to contain erotic interests, feelings and responses. Normally, it may be experienced and expressed in various physical and emotional ways and manners. Sexuality is a more comprehensive and crucial aspect of human life which is highly regulated by the societies. Sexuality is legalized through construction of a dichotomy of male-female sexuality and sexual identity. Sexuality is the way people experience and express themselves which has assorted among social, cultural, political, religious and historical surroundings and contexts.

According to Grebe and Drea (2017), human sexuality is largely defined as the totality of experiences, systems, attributes and behavior that characterize the sexual sensation, reproduction, and intimacy of Homo sapiens. The report of WHO (2006) explains that sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender

identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (WHO, 2006).

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2011 (SIECUS) clearly defines human sexuality, as 'human sexuality encompasses the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of individual. Its various dimensions involve the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the sexual response system: identity, orientation, roles, and personality; and thoughts, feelings and relationships. Sexuality is influenced by ethical, spiritual, cultural, and moral concerns. All persons are sexual beings in the broadest sense of the word. Sexuality is an expansive term that pertains to far more than our biology or sexual behaviors although these two elements are certainly integral parts' (SIECUS, 2011).

An individual's sexuality is defined by whom one has sex with, in what ways, why and under what circumstances and with what consequences. It is more than sexual behavior and is a multidimensional and dynamic concept. Explicit and implicit rules imposed by society as defined by one's gender, age, economic status, ethnicity and other factors influence an individual's sexuality (Gupta, 2000). Similarly, sexuality is defined as being socially constructed in terms of social, political and economical influences (Fine, 1993; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sex differences in human sexuality are plentiful which include physical, psychological, and psycho-physiological variations (Geary, 1998). Accordingly, sexuality is concerned solely with the biological and psychological capacities of individuals somehow existing prior to social life which continues to dominate the popular imagination even as sex has increasingly become a matter of public discourse (Stein, 1989). Thus, sexuality is highly social, cultural and political issue rather than private or personal one. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (WHO, 2002). Sexuality is entirely socially constructed through discourse which stems from the quest to construct the truth of sex. It is through this discourse that desires are assigned and particular meanings and relationships between identity and sexuality is built (Foucault, 1980).

A strong debate in the construction of sexuality is that of biological essentialism or naturally/genetically determined and social constructionism or nurture/socially and culturally constructed. Social constructionists claim that the homosexual cannot be assumed to be a trans-historical nature; in its place the nature of homosexuality instigates as staining a divergent emotional and physical human identity in societies. Notwithstanding sexual behavior is definitely socially, culturally and politically influenced, in the view of the fact that it differs in a number of ways from one society to other and one historical time period to another. There is such regularity over and again in several

patterns of sexual performances and activities across space and time period that it must be impressively embedded in genetic truth and psycho- personality nature. In the same way, essentialists claims that essentialism associates hereditarily controlled sex to a hetero-normative sexual orientation and stimulation. Sexual essentialism believes sexuality as an unchanging fact and that it is strongly influence by natural or genetic order. Essentialists endorse that sexuality is a property of an individual, and does not include social, cultural and political determinants. Despite the fact that both essentialists and constructionists compromise a version between biological and socio-cultural factors in determining human understanding and realization about sexuality.

Foucault's Theory of Sexuality and Power

Foucault's theory of sexuality as a discourse of truth and apparatus of power formulate to explain crucial subject matter of sexuality which operates in everyday life whereby individual seek to struggle to get power and position in social life. The main contribution of Foucault is rich analysis of sex and sexuality not seeing it as natural and essential but repressed by power. Foucault claims that modern regimes of power operate to produce us as subjects who are both objects and vehicles of power. Foucault intends on 'regime of power-knowledge-pleasure' and the 'power pleasure dichotomy' interchangeably. Both concepts provide an unidentifiable till date unavoidable supremacy and pressure that shapes society and culture through sexuality as repression and incitement. These power arrangements do not entirely stifle nor entirely promote sex. Similarly, he dismantles various ancient sexual norms, traditions and morals by revealing them as societal constructs at the same time. Arising from a traditional religious moral regime of sexuality is more secular and it is operating within diverse system of morals and ethics. Likewise, it is based on individuals constructing and living a life where sex becomes part of a secular regimen with pleasures, commitments and responsibilities. According to Foucault, strange hitherto entirely invasive power sources have been formed and continue to shape individual beliefs and sexual culture about sexuality. He asserts that everything is fundamental, useful or dangerous, and precious as well as formidable concerning sex and sexuality.

Foucault's (1976; 1984) historical survey of the construction of sexual subjectivities and normativities and their institutional and political contexts in ancient and Victorian societies is the paradigm study for social constructionist analyses (Foucault, 1976; 1984). In the nineteenth century, sexuality becomes a special problem announced within the expert discourse, first to theologians, then to scientists. This discourse becomes embodied in everyday life at homes, schools, churches and hospitals under the watchful eyes of priests, nuns, doctors and mothers. Finally, in the late twentieth century, sexuality becomes central to an intensive system of care, knowledge and appreciation of the self. In the present era, the intensive system of sexuality is linked to an obsessive concern with the forces of sexual repression and a search for the truth and emancipation of sexual being (Foucault, 1980: 77). Foucault argues that sexuality cannot under any circumstances be the object of punishment (Plaza, 1981). Foucault has argued that nothing in man not even his body is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self recognition or for understanding of other men (Foucault 1991: 87). There is no natural body or pre-discursive, essential human subject who is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order; it is rather the

individual who is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies (Foucault, 1977: 217). Similarly, Foucault has declared that resistance subsists everywhere where there is normalisation and domination. Power is never total, uniform or smooth but shifting and unstable; if it is exerted on 'micro levels' it can be contested on micro levels; there is 'no single locus of great Refusal' but a 'plurality of resistances' (Foucault 1998: 95-6). Foucault has strongly announced that sexuality was not the subject of expert discourse or of public debate and discussion. It remained, so to speak, in the body rather than on the mind (Foucault, 1980: 3).

Booker (1994) argues that sexuality functions as a focal point for an entire array of practices through which modern society has attempted to constitute the individual as a subject of administrative control. Psychoanalysis itself is one of these practices, and Foucault especially argues that the psychoanalytic project of categorizing certain sexual practices as normal and others as deviant contributes to general strategies for the manipulation of individual behavior in modern society (Booker, 1994). A key concern is the way regimes of power and knowledge propagate pathologies, prejudices and oppressions, and their naturalisation and normalisation circulate discursively within the social milieu (Seidman, 2010).

The control of sexuality largely took place through the control of marriage, the way Foucault has termed it as the 'deployment of alliance' (Foucault, 1980: 106). Foucault claims that family becomes the locus of the shift from the deployment of alliance to the deployment of sexuality; particularly in relation to the constitution of the feminine body, the concealment of sex from children, the regulation of births and the prevention of deviance (Foucault, 1980: 111). Foucault says that birth-rate, age of marriage, legitimate and illegitimate births, precocity and frequency of sexual relations, ways of making them fertile or sterile, effects of unmarried life or of the prohibitions, the impact of contraceptive practices (Foucault, 1980: 25). Sexuality and the requirement to be sexy are preached in media and consumer society and operate within individuals as a positive pursuit of an ethical, healthy, pleasurable lifestyle. It is part of the drive to create a new society (Foucault, 1980: 77).

Foucauldian Narratives and Feminist Imaginations

Foucault's ideas have been useful to feminism in their challenge to paradigms of western perspectives, methods and thinking rationalities. Foucauldian discourse has established with disloyal degrees of passion in feminist dialogues and conversations from different angles. Some feminist such as Balbus, 1988; Di Leonardo, 1991; Hartsock, 1990 has perceived a Foucauldian stand as uneven with feminist assumption and interpretation, at the same time other feminists such as Grimshaw, 1993; Hoy, 1988; McNay, 1992; Sawicki (1988, 1994) and Bartky (1988) have supported a constructive relation between Foucauldian discourse and feminism or feminist discourses. Many feminist have believed that the oppression of women can be justified by patriarchal social structures which secure the power and social legitimacy of men over women and women's existences. Bartky has recommended that women's superficial diverse principles, values and relationships that support their subordination is caused by the actuality that complicating the patriarchal construction of the female may call into question that aspect of personal identity is tied to the development of a sense of competence (Bartky 1988: 77; Sawicki 1994: 293).

Likewise, Bordo has taken Foucauldian approaching to stand in her examination of mostly female eating disorders (Bordo, 1988). Bartky and Bordo have located that Foucault's contributions are more helpful to justify women's attachment in patriarchal principles and beliefs of femininity in different social structures and arrangements.

Foucault provides constructive visions, methods and techniques to feminist discourses which can also be dangerous for feminists and feminism. The implications of Foucauldian discourse for feminism is in criticizing Foucault for not embarking on women, men and gendered surroundings. There are some remarkable concerns of convergence, for example, sexuality and area of political struggle, expansion of political and social domination, critique of biological and humanism determinism, search for a scientific truth, human sciences and modern forms of domination, analysis of the politics of personal relations in everyday life, critique of the rational question etc. (McNay, 1992; Sawicki, 1988, 1991). According to Sawicki, the principles of Foucault's late contributions for feminist discourses consist in the theoretical tools for related theories and practices. Sawicki has claimed that the dilemma with this view of emancipation does not go far enough reversing power positions without altering relations of power is rarely liberating, it is not a sufficient condition of liberation to throw off the yoke of domination either (Sawicki, 1998: 102).

Many postmodernist theories as well as Foucault's work of power and sexuality especially have been criticized in feminist reading for their 'anaemic' politics (Hartsock, 1996). As Foucault has not engaged directly with feminism, neither did he make a significant contribution to analyses of female and female sexuality. This has been criticized because it is essentialist (Butler, 1990) and unaware of the fact that female is repression at various intersections. In the context of feminist identity politics, Butler has argued that a feminist identity politics demands to a set feminist subject presumes fixes and constrains the very subjects that it hopes to represent and liberate (Butler, 1990: 148). It is observed that in Foucault's understanding of identity as a consequence, Butler appreciates other various aptitudes and comprehensions for feminist political exercise. These elements are barred by positions that capture identity to be set. Butler has asserted that gender identity is basically a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (Butler, 1990: 33). It is proclaimed that many feminists have criticized Foucault's lack of interest in feminist politics which is clearly marked that Foucault had relatively little to say about the second-wave feminism that was one of the key political movements of his time (Cressida, 2013). It poses a certain dilemma for feminists that it is an emancipatory political movement (Margaret, 2002) aspiring to transform the social realities of gender disparity and unfairness in various societies and cultures.

Foucault gives a great contribution to feminist studies of power and sexuality by expressing larger degree of dialogue with feminist discourse. According to Foucault, 'truth' is manifested through discourses esteemed as legitimate, reliable knowledge, and it is such that power produces knowledge. The feminist rejection of Foucault's theory of power and knowledge production is misinterpreted with misunderstanding at that time. Many feminists emphasize power as a key site of convergence with Foucault (Diamond and Quinby, 1998), likewise some feminists are tensed to Foucault's provocative and

highly original analyses of power that emphasize the micro-level (Allen, 1996). Feminism, mainly radical feminism, has a venerable trend to concentrate on macro-level power politics and social relations, targeting patriarchal structures, principles and systems as the source of disparity and discrimination in the sacrifice of trying to appreciate micro-level power relationships.

Foucault's Lacking Concerns and Feminist Reservations

There are several reservations and fears regarding the usefulness of Foucauldian framework for feminism and its discourses. Foucault has claimed that the construct of an apparently 'natural' sex performs to facade the productive process of power in connection to sexuality. Sauerteig and Davidson (2009) have argued that prevailing courses to construct on Foucault's analysis of so-called 'natural' sexuality has been increasingly interpreted as a historically contingent practice closely connected to power relations and values (Sauerteig and Davidson, 2009:1). Foucault has argued that the notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made possible to invert the representation of relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as its best can to dominate (Foucault 1978: 155).

Judith Butler's has formatted, cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as prior to culture (Butler 1990: 7). Butler has claimed that concept of 'natural' sex is previous to culture and socialization and is occupied in the construction and safeguarding of gendered power relationships in different cultures as it has accepted the dogmatic belief of an apparently natural heterosexuality, heterosexual domination and reproductive constraints on sexuality. Butler argues that the historical force of discourse and norms is their power over the time to enact what they name. Butler's critique of normative heterosexuality discourse, materiality, performance are loosely connected to history, power and social order (Butler, 1993, 187). It is obvious that feminists have focused more on gender construction of sexuality where women's subjection and oppression are determinant features of sexual oppression (Jeffreys, 1990; 2003; Marinucci, 2010). Similarly, according to McNay, Foucault's history of sexuality exposes the contingent and socially determined nature of sexuality and thus frees the body from the regulatory fiction of heterosexuality and opens up new realms in which bodily pleasures can be explored (McNay 1992: 30). So, it can be concluded that the relationship between power and sexuality is distorted and confused. Despite the fact that sexuality is considered as a disruptive natural force for which power purely opposes and represses.

Foucault has argued that the real strength of women's movement is not having laid claim to the specificity of their sexuality and the rights pertaining to it, but that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted with the apparatuses of sexuality (Foucault, 1980, p. 219). Foucault himself neither considered the linkage of his contribution among feminists or feminist discourses, nor did he observe the importance of his efforts in feminism and feminist movement. Soper (1993) has criticized Foucault for his gender

blindness and 'covert androcentricity' (Soper, 1993, p. 29). Similarly, Foucauldian established procedures and relationships of feminisms does not improved the works of the developing countries like a third world realities, the hegemonic influences of patriarchal and imperialist capitalism (Hartsock, 1990). Mohanty (1991) believed that there is a various effort on women and women related issues in developing countries but this does not necessarily engage feminist issues (Mohanty, 1991).

A feminist reading illuminates how Foucault's narrative constitutes the male body in procreation as a single action, the ejaculation of sperm, while the female body becomes an object, which passively receives it. After male body ejaculates, male is freed for more important public work, while female is committed to years of child rearing (Buker, 2017). Male and female inaugurates and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire (Butler, 1990, 17). Buker (2017) says that feminist analyses can extend Foucault's argument by showing how the medicalization of abortion and birth control become mechanisms by which the state exercises control over sexual activity and child production, in addition claiming not to interfere in family matters. The state hides its power exercise behind its pretense of protecting the privacy of the family. The control over a so-called 'intimate' act then shows the ability of the state to penetrate inner workings of the family to its most secret center where it creates itself, site of its origins that is bedroom. Feminist analysis shows how this controls the lives of women and reduces their ability to participate in public life and thereby privatizing half the population (Buker, 2017). It is an established thought human history women have sexually and socially used, abused and harassed because of her biology in both private and public life.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that there are a number of positive and negative aspects of Foucault's investigation of relationship between power and sexuality which have encouraged and developed an innovative feminist conversation, practices and thinking. The fact is that Foucault's theory of sexuality unkindly ignores the entire cultural ethics of sexuality sexual behaviors and morals, female sexuality and desire of love, female pregnancy and suffering, and female sexual feeling and experience. Foucault argues that these issues are nothing over the byproduct of the power-pleasure dichotomy. On the other hand Foucault's notion of power and sexuality is a critical and functional discourse for feminists and its debates to explore the many crucial questions and ground realities such as patriarchal power structure and micro-politics of personal life, man's powers and social legitimacy, social construction of gender and sexuality, social control over women's bodies and minds etc. Likewise, Foucault's notion of power and sexuality is a further constructive attributes for feminist discussions to search multifaceted and complicated women's issues such as women's experiences and everyday lives, women's capacities and potentialities, women's subordination and exploitations, women's sexuality and reproduction, women's identities and life chances and women's self-happiness and social transformation etc.

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