

## **Between the covers**

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### **Vice Versa**

*bisexuality and the eroticism of everyday life*

*by Marjorie Garber*

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Too often, lesbians and gay men have claimed that those who call themselves bisexuals are really closeted lesbians or gay men, who try to claim "heterosexual" privileges while enjoying the "fruits" of the lesbian and gay struggle. Or that calling oneself bisexual was really "chic".

At the same time, whenever a historical person is discovered to have same sex encounters, this person is claimed as a lesbian or gay person, even if it is known that they were married, or had sexual encounters with the 'opposite sex'. Even though such categories, lesbian, gay homosexual, heterosexual, are all recent inventions and constructions.

This invisibilising of behavioural choices by both "heterosexuals" and by lesbians and gay men is indicative of the power of labelling and numbers, and the disempowering of sexual choice and desire.

If we look at all the data on sexual behaviour in South Asia, (I can only talk of men who have sex with men, since that is the area of my knowledge) a very significant majority of such men claim to enjoy sex with their wives/other women, while the vast majority unmarried MSM state that they will get married (some 95% interviewed). And when we analysis the level of sexual encounters between married MSM and their wives, even those who are kothi identified, we find higher than expected actual acts, indicative of some pleasurable outcome. What are we to make of this?

On the other hand, claiming a lesbian or gay identity, even a kothi identity, enables one to develop a sense of community and empowerment, and participation in a struggle for freedom to choose and the rights that go along with that.

But I wonder....in a society with multiple minorities, the risk for fighting for lesbian and gay rights specifically might develop into a hierarchy of powerlessness and victimhood. Perhaps we should be fighting for coalitions, for a genuine strategy of human rights, the

rights to choice, the rights over one's own body and so on. For such a strategy we should be exploring this whole concept of sexuality and orientation. The power of the label and identity. Do we make identity compulsory to join the "tribe"? What distinguishes identity *from* behavioural *choice*. What is desire? Well the questions are endless.

And is there such a thing as homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality? Or do we, like Gore Vidal, state (1979, *Playboy*) that "there is no such thing as a homosexual person, any more than there is such a thing as a heterosexual person. The words are adjectives, describing sexual acts, not people. Those acts are entirely natural; if they were not, no one would perform them."

Garber states that...."If bisexuality is in fact, as I suspect it to be, not just another sexual orientation but rather a sexuality that undoes sexual orientation as a category, a sexuality that threatens and challenges the easy binaries of straight and gay, queer and 'het', and even, through its biological and physiological meanings, the gender categories of male and female, then the search for the meaning of the word "bisexual" offers a different kind of lesson. Rather than naming an invisible, undernoticed minority now finding its place in the sun, "bisexual" turns out to be, like bisexuals themselves, everywhere and nowhere. There is, in short, no "really" about it. The question of whether someone was "really" straight" or "really" gay misrecognises the nature of sexuality, which is fluid, not fixed, a narrative that changes over time rather than a fixed identity, however complex. The erotic discovery of bisexuality is the fact that it reveals sexuality *to be a process of growth, transformation., and surprise, not a stable and knowable state of being.*"(p65-66)[my italics]

She adds, "Bisexuality unsettles certainties: straight, gay, lesbian. It has affinities with all of these, and is delimited by none. It is, then, an identity that is also *not* an identity, a sign of the certainty of ambiguity, the stability of instability, a category that defies and defeats categorisation. What critic Elisabeth Daumer calls "the multiplicity of at times conflicting identifications generated by the bisexual point of view," an "ambiguous position *between* identities," can produce "radical discontinuities between an individual's sex acts and affectional choices, on the one hand, and her and his affirmed political identity on the other." No wonder it makes sexual politicians uncomfortable." (p70)

Further, she states, "....theorists have engaged the radical discontinuities of present day sexual separatism and advocacy as they reflect upon the language in which we talk about sexualities. The use of 'same-sex' and 'opposite-sex', avoids historical anomaly

when talking about the past but also allows for the articulation of a bisexual presence. What do you call a married man who is having an affair with another man? If you call him 'gay', you supply a label that may not meet the specifics of the case. You also erase bisexuality. He becomes either 'gay' or 'straight'. Such binary language will not offer a space for bisexuality because it declines to take temporality into consideration.: Bisexuality, as I have suggested is not an 'identity'... but a narrative, a story..." (p87)

Garber explores the implications of Kinsey. "What does the first Kinsey report, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*, (produced in 1948 in the States) have to say about bisexuals? Firstly that the category includes almost half the population. Of those surveyed, 446 percent had engaged in both heterosexual and homosexual activities, or reacted to persons of both sexes, during their adult lives. Second, that the term used to describe this group was both inaccurate and inexact. (p251)

"...it should, however, be used (says the Kinsey report) with the understanding that it is patterned on the words 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual', and, like them, refers to the sex of the partner, and proves nothing about the constitution of the person who is labelled bisexual.." (p251)

"... the Kinsey authors see clearly that the hypothetical division of the world of sexual beings into two groups, heterosexual and homosexual, creates a potentially false dichotomy and, in consequence, a misunderstanding - and underestimation - of the importance of 'bisexuality' in human social life..." (p251)

In other words, there may well be a preponderance of homosexual activity, but only a small segment of "homosexuals".

It is the refocusing on the exclusive homosexual end of the Kinsey scale that has invisibilised the preponderance of bisexual activity. in terms of HIV/AIDS we ignore this at our social peril.

Such research also decries the attempt to define some innate characteristic that defines "the homosexual - "a gay gene" say, because this is based on an unbridgeable gap between "gay and "straight".

Thus the Kinsey Report goes onto say "... if homosexual activity persists on such a large scale as it does, in the face of the very considerable public sentiment against it and in spite of the severity of the penalties that our Anglo-American culture has placed upon it through the centuries, there seems some reason for believing that such activity

would appear in the histories of a much larger proportion of the population if there were no social restraints.." (p252)

Garber then states "... 'Heterosexuals' and 'homosexual' may be both culturally produced categories... if so, then, as the Kinsey scale itself suggests, there are really no boundaries except those ordained by custom..." (p252)

".....precisely because of the crossover factor: the presence in their study of so many individuals who had both homosexual and heterosexual experiences or responses.... was, in fact, evidence of bisexual behaviour and feelings, even or especially at a time when such behaviour and feelings were publicly under attack...which led the authors of the Kinsey Report to promulgate their famous sexual continuum... and what may have shocked mainstream America most of all - was not the existence of significant number of 'homosexuals' but rather the overwhelming presence of [bisexual behaviour] in American life. (p253)

This book, I believe is a critical one to read for those developing sexual health intervention strategies, if they can be persuaded to unshackle their minds to the reality and nature of human sexuality, desires and behaviours, and stop trying to fit everything into binary and hierarchical structures. For, as the jacket states, that while....."the idea of bisexuality intrigues, titillates and provokes.." it also..." unnerves men and women, straight and gay alike. Is bisexuality a 'third choice'" between (or beyond) hetero-or homosexuality? Or is it something that questions the very concept of sexual identity itself?

My reading of this book is that Garber sets out to do the latter.

Exploring a breadth of material, from re-reading of texts, European classical mythology, biology, literature, psychoanalysis, film and music, this book has been defined as a "landmark of scholarship and a riveting challenge to conventional beliefs."

"Before the eighteenth century, bisexuality was a practice, not an identity...." and that was true of homosexuality and heterosexuality. All these terms were invented and their frameworks constructed in the late 19th and early 20th century, as part of a "scientific" need to reduce things into categories of being, fixed, innate and inviolable. But is this true? I do not believe so. The consequence of this reductionist, Decartian approach to human sexuality, desires and behaviours was to believe that human sexual behaviour fits into some neat category of binary thinking, of an either, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, 'straight' or 'gay'. But human nature and choices do not fit

into such neat categories. It is perverse by its own nature, individuated choices, filled with "heat and dust", the erotics of play, desire, and lust. It is the politics of the perverse. It requires us to understand the straight jacket and dehumanising frameworks of normative and normalising structures that perversely create the socialised 'big brother' where who we are, what we are, what we desire and what actions arise from those desires are 'under the blanket', "between the sheets", invisibilised and socially denied.

But what an enormous cost this brings. Millions infected with HIV. Millions dead or dying. A society ruptured and disfigured. Where joy is marginalised and chained to political and social correctness.

But this book is not only for Anglo-Europeans. If one has a chance to read "Same Sex Love in India" by Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai (profiled in Pukaar 32), or the Kama Sutra, or seen the temples of Khajarahah, or even the stories in the Mahabharata, similar findings can be made. The interplay between gender roles, sexualities, masculinities, femininities and sexual behaviours. And the evidence of male sexual behaviours in South Asia bear this out.

It is in this context, that those working on sexual health issues and HIV prevention, should explore the issue of sexual behaviours and choices more closely. Do we impose our own perceived ideologies and "norms" upon others when all the evidence indicates an incredibly diverse range of sexual behavioural choices and practice? To follow this path is to ignore and/or deny the reality of the situation and to consign innumerable people to death because of our silence, ignorance and ideology.

As Garber quotes from *Sex in America* "...people often change their sexual behaviour during their lifetimes. making it impossible to state that a particular set of behaviours defines a person as gay... Does a man who left his wife of twenty years for a gay lover count as a homosexual or a heterosexual?... Does the married woman who had sex with a college roommate a decade ago count? Do you assume that one homosexual experience defines someone as gay all the time?.." (p266) Perhaps all we can ultimately say is that "bisexuality" is "not this" and "not that". This is as true in South Asia as it is for heartland of America.

Developing sexual health programmes for men who have sex with men in South Asia requires us to keep an open mind, one that is non-judgmental and non-victimising, to discover what is really going on "out there". To ensure that we validate whatever choices people make, and not claim to know them "inside", blame them, or abuse them,

just because they do not "fit" into our cosy picture of binary, hierarchy and gender normality.

A gay man who disavows a kothi *identity* is really saying that femininity is only for 'real' females . A kothi plays the same dangerous game in regard to panthis and gay men.

Exploring the concepts, dimensions, and even the *queerness* of bisexual behaviours and choices (of bisexuality? - which then makes it a *condition* and generates the *species* bisexual), gives us a better understanding of the nature of desire and action, which can lead us to more effective sexual health strategies which deal with real choices and real people, not our own interpretations and ideologies.

Such an approach requires us to be honest, to confront the reality of people's lives in ways that empower them to be open with themselves. And in so doing make choices that reduce risks of transmission of HIV. But to be truly effective such an approach must also be non-judgmental and supportive. Empowering the self is the only way forward.