Tupperware Sexuality: Consumption, 'Morality' and the Search for a Controllable Modernity

Sanjay Srivastava

Kitty Party [menu]: Pasta Salad, stuffed Mushroom Pakodas, Carrot Soup, Mango Mousse, Mushroom and Babycorn Masala, Veg. Tacos, Mickey Mouse cake, Veg. Lollypop, Cheesy Moon, Baby Pizza, Lemon Curd, Tart, Alu Sandwich. ['Party Special Supplement, *Meri Saheli*, 1998]

It's the middle of the night and in the dim light of the night-bulb Monica is trying to get to sleep without much success. She turns around to look at her husband Shekhar, who is fast asleep. She places her hand on his chest, but he doesn't stir. She now places his head on his chest and runs her fingers through his hair. He is soon awakened. His sleepy eyes look at Monica, and he roughly gathers her in his arms. After a short while he is satisfied and goes back to sleep. But Monica is unable to sleep: what she wanted from Shekhar went beyond the physical. But Shekhar had no time for Monica. ('Sex. Not just for entertainment, but also part of life' *Meri Saheli* 1999)

This discussion is about certain sites of urban sexual cultures in India. These include mainstream 'women's magazines', popular sexological magazines, cheaply produced 'footpath pornography', and 'sex-clinics' that attract large number of relatively poor urban men searching for medicines for sexual 'performance' and 'male strength', cure for impotence, and ways to beget male progeny. The title of this paper comes from two articles published in the late 1990s in the popular 'woman's magazine' *Meri Saheli*, and this discussion is about the coming together of sexuality, consumption cultures and ideas of class in the pages of magazines such as this one, as well as others such as *Grhasobha* and *Grhalaxmi* . The contexts of sexuality, consumption and class are, in turn, related to the emergence of the female consumer as an object of interest for advertisers and marketers. And, finally, my paper is about how discourses on heterosexuality and what I will call 'surplus consumption' and 'threshold subjectivities' come to delineate ideas of agency, empowerment, and an 'authentic' Indianness.

I will begin with an instance of 'market-scholarship' through focusing at a publication produced by the multi-national advertising agency McCann-Erickson's India office. Noting the presence of a large number of working women by the 1990s, the McCann-Erikson advertising agency carried out a major survey to explore its 'cultural implications' for 'communicators and marketers'.

> Over the last two years [the study noted], the consumer insight team at McCann-Erikson India has been meeting women across the country in an effort to understand their feelings, needs, motivations, fears and anxieties. We conducted focus group discussions among women from SEC A, B & C, talking to housewives, working women, mothers-in-law and young girls in metros… and in smaller cities….
>
> …Emerging Mindsets: The Anxious Working Wife; Mother-Friend-Cheerleader; the Homemaker-plus; Freedom at Fifty…
>
> Not surprisingly, the wish list of the New Age woman is articulated as:
>
> - need for recognition
> - Yearning for romance
> - Need for personal leisure
> - Need for emotional support
> - Need to reconcile personal ambition with traditional roles
>
> Therein lays the big opportunity for brands to address some of these needs. By rooting brands in socio-cultural reality, marketers stand to benefit from a deeper relationship with their consumers[1].

The September 1998 issue of *Meri Saheli* 'woman's' magazine contains among other contributions, the articles 'Sex, Some Independent Thoughts', and, 'Those Little Things That Even Your Mother Hesitates From Telling You'. In the same issue is another piece that pithily captures the movement towards a 'deeper relationship' between consumers and marketers that McCann Erikson dreams of. Entitled 'A Rainbow of Wishes', the article describes the Annual Convention of Tupperware Managers held in a five-star hotel in Kathmandu:

> …there were more than two hundred house-wives in attendance, their faces aglow with the success and their every gesture filling the place with happiness and good feeling. They came with a spring in their step, a lilt in their laughter, and in beautiful clothing – in other words, the world was their oyster. Many of them who might never even have danced a step or even peered out from behind their veils, danced under colourful lights like so many butterflies. All of them were Tupperware managers and distributors.
>
> (Singh 1998:98)

The article goes on to quote Tupperware's head of South Asia ('Larry Cameron') that the brand's popularity in India has been almost unprecedented, and that he had never come across such a successful group of Tupperware managers 'anywhere'. The women themselves are described as sharing in each other's happiness, and it is noted

that some who could not meet the target had paid their own way to be at the convention. The author emphasizes that all the women are ‘house-wives’ and is curious as to whether they faced any difficulties in their activities in selling Tupperware products. Did the men in their households object to the fact they would have to take time out from their domestic duties? While most faced no hurdles, and said that they were supported by their husbands, others reported some initial resistance which later gave way to support. For both groups of women, there was one factor which swayed the men of their families: that this activity did not compromise their role as housewives. As one of the women said, ‘initially my husband wasn’t very happy about it, but then [when he saw that] I could earn money from home, it was a question of “well why not?” ’. And, another explained that:

> This product has brought about a revolutionary change among Indian women. They can now earn a good income at the same time that they look after their household duties. They get to socialize with other as well productively utlise their free time.
>
> (Singh 1998:99)

The gendering of consumption practices – specifically, the extension of the consuming franchise to women – has the potential to introduce certain forms of tensions in domestic life. These have to do with the individualisation of women’s activity as consumers, and hence, potentially, of women themselves. Taking part in the cultures of consumption may also require interaction – either as a distributor of goods or their consumer – with others who may not belong to the household, and this constitutes a potential call on the time that the woman might otherwise devote to the up-keep of the domestic sphere. In the case of Tupperware, the undoubted excitement of taking part in consumption culture – an all expense paid trip to Kathmandu surrounded by gleaming plastic that shiningly iconicise ‘success’ – is carefully located within a discourse of first-order subjectivity of the woman as housewife.

The successful female consumer is one for whom consumption is an added dimension of housewifely-ness, rather than its substitute: the individualism of consumerism and its allied cultures do open up certain spaces of self-fulfilment, though not at the expense of the care of the house. The ‘outside’ is brought into the home, and home-ness becomes the sieve for sifting the consumption proper to women. For the

Tupperware women, the extra income generated through taking part in the public work of consumption then comes about through an overall increase in the expenditure of female labour. In the images that accompany the story, the Tupperware women are shown playing around with plastic containers, as they might with children who complete the meaning of womanhood. These images of the rewards and pleasures of appropriate consumption for women are instructive for what they tell us about the inherent flexibility of consumption practices in terms of their ability to become local practices. They also say something of the perceptions of compatibility between compulsion and autonomy: only those who met the company's target are in Kathmandu, though this does not alter their sense of their status as women as having undergone a 'revolutionary change'.

Cultural theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000) and Arjun Appadurai (1997) suggest that the new cultures of consumption mark a turn towards ephemerality as the dominant motif in contemporary life. So, as Appadurai puts it

> Consumption creates time, but modern consumption seeks to replace the aesthetics of duration with the aesthetics of ephemerality.
>
> (Appadurai, 1997: 84-85; original emphasis).

However, there is a – counterintuitive – possibility that modern consumption might be seen (by the consumer) as the only form of permanence available. As Rajagopal points out, 'increasingly the kinds of power made available through consumption may come to be seen as more dependable and secure, and to offer a more pragmatic choice than the unpredictable outcome of events in the public realm, with the figure of dishonest politicians casting a shadow over it' (Rajagopal 1999:62). If, in turn, sexuality is imagined as a truth – permanent and solid – then it becomes logical to align it to the broader world of commodities and consumption culture in as much as the latter come to be seen as 'dependable and secure', providing a life-strategy that is under one's own control. The 'aesthetics of ephemerality' that contemporary consumption cultures appear to present as their grounds of play might then – if positioned against perceptions of untrustworthy institutions and their suspect promises – harbour multiple quests for *permanence*. It is in this sense that I am interested in the ways in which the coming together of commodities and sexuality-as-consumption in

the pages of the magazines might represent quite fundamental quests of defining the self.

Not unlike Tuppeware's plasticity, this project can accommodate a multiplicity of trajectories of self-exploration, some startlingly at odds with the – no doubt accurate – prescriptions of femininity within Indian life catalogued by feminist scholarship. The following two letters from readers are reproduced from the 'Don't Be Embarrassed to Ask' column of the July 2000 issue of the popular *Grhalakshmi* magazine:

> (1) Question: I am a twenty-five year old woman and have been married for two years. My husband is an engineer. We lead a satisfactory married life but recently I have run into the problem that my husband likes anal-sex. However, I too have begun to enjoy it, but am concerned about its ill-effects. Is it dangerous? Please advise.
>
> Reply: According to the scientific point of view, anal-sex is just another form of intercourse, and if both partners agree, it can be performed without any hesitation. Your health will not be affected. If possible, the man should use a condom during anal-sex.
>
> (2) Question: I am an eighteen-year old [female] student. I would like to know whether, as is possible for men, women too can masturbate. Is this harmful? What if the finger is inserted in the vagina?
>
> Reply: Both men and women masturbate, and this is a normal activity. There are no harmful side-effects whatsoever[2].

'Sexual modesty' has been a significant way of characterising middle-class feminine identity in India. However, as aspect of contemporary commodity cultures, 'sexual modesty' and 'sexual adventurism' ought not to be seen as contradictory impulses. They are, in fact, aspects of the contemporary self trained in the arts of dealing with the multiple possibilities of the consumerist present; it is only the rapidly transforming present that is ephemeral, learning to deal with it through a multiplicity of behaviours and strategies – here through consumption acts – is a consistent and everlasting activity. This, in turn, is connected to what might be called surplus consumption, that is, a manner of being in the world that draws together a number of seemingly contradictory life-strategies within the same habitus. So, within the same issue, the magazines carry explicit discussions on female sexuality and religious 'supplements' supplements sponsored by consumer goods manufacturers that explain the significance of religious festivals and texts and rituals in minute detail. 'Tradition' is

not perceived as an obstacle to otherwise non-traditional pleasures, rather it is the supplement to the making of – as I discuss below – a sphere of 'moral' consumption that, in turn, is linked to the idea of a moral middle-class.

Tupperware sexuality – as I here call it – is an aspect of surplus consumption, where discussions on religiosity, anal sex and female masturbation, and the frisson of plastic containers appear cheek-by-jowl. Tupperware sexuality is, for its adherents and practitioners, as meaningful a social context as, say, religious belief; it is culture itself, rather than a surface effect that obstructs a view of a true Indian (sexual) culture.

I would now like to explore some of the ways in which Tupperware sexuality is articulated through, as well as expresses, engagements with an 'outside' world that is an important backdrop to ideas of becoming both modern and middle-class. This is crucial to the ways in which the notion of a controllable body is implicated in the making of controllable and moral modernity.

Bodies Out of Place, Meetings Out of Chance

One of the most significant contexts of intimacy in *Meri Saheli* and *Grhalakshmi* consists in the meeting with 'strangers': those interactions beyond the gaze of the household that are a crucial fact of urban life[3]. This is also the promise of *another* world of self-realisation. In the pages of the magazines, intimacy is also positioned as an aspect of contemporary consumption culture, where the commodity is a mediator between the home one can not leave, and the world one desires. It is not, however, an 'outside' that takes the subject forever away from the home, even though it might introduce a different dynamic to the domestic environment; rather, the woman-reader seeks to re-negotiate the inside, rather than seeking a complete escape from it (even if that was possible for someone in her social circumstance).

There are three particular ways in which this happens. Firstly, the 'New Woman' whom we have met earlier, meets a number of experts who provide 'advice' on topics such as sexual satisfaction and orgasm, a process that also signifies the contexts of 'transparency', public-ness, and disclosure as crucial to the making of middle-classness. The reader meets the expert in a non-familial space that is crowded with the

sights and sounds of a million must-have commodities, and the gestures, conversations, and whispers of a passing parade that is the tumult of cultural messages in a transnational public sphere. Further, the expert's 'authority' is also linked to the fact that she/he is plies her/his trade as one shop-stall among all the other goods on offer in the pages of the publication. The expert is not a tainted state official, nor an unreliable politician: her/his wares bask in the positive light of contemporary consumption practices that surround it and that are at once deemed more reliable and more dependable than anything the Five-Year Plan state could ever offer.

Secondly, a significant manner in which intimacy is externalised in the magazines is through juxtaposing intimate acts that happen 'for the first time' with descriptions of places where they might take place. This concerns, in particular, the interweaving of life-events that happen 'in passing' – 'the creative power of chance' (Lestienne 1998) – with discussions of – and this is the third aspect – tourism and travel as important rites of passage of the modern self. These can usually be found in regular sections such as the one in MS called '*Pehla* Affair' ('My First Affair'), and '*Suhana Safar*' ('Beautiful Journies'). In the latter, life itself is presented as a journey and an unfolding and the Bakhtinian notion of the chronotope of the road is useful for thinking about the context where in the new economy *chance* plays a significant role in self-making. Chance, and its concomitant, risk, is, as if, the new motif of this context of consuming and self-making. The *mise en scène* of such chance encounters is varied, though most commonly it features college campuses, trains, airports, and tourist sites. The discussion on sexual intimacy that are carried on with such 'outsiders' in imagined spaces that are beyond the home, also mark a subtle questioning of the relationships 'proper' to the domesticated woman: should she consult and defer to no one but the husband, and the daughter, her parents and brothers? Not quite feminism as we know it, but, as Chris Rojek (1993) has discussed in the context of 19th century Europe, it is worthwhile thinking about our notions of 'politics' within which we too frequently assume that 'capitalism, in the last instance, subordinates and pacifies women' (Rojek 1993:58). This position too frequently assumes a politicised 'us' whose identities do not rely on consumption practices, versus passive others who make meanings out of the 'false consciousness' of consuming practices.

As mentioned above, tourist sites are also spaces of making meanings (Pinney 1997:175), and all the magazines carry regular supplements on travel and tourism. These provide detailed notes on places to visit, the different categories of hotels available, when to go, what to buy, and the appropriate places for, say, families, and 'honeymooning couples'. The December 1998 'Bride Special Issue' produced by *Meri Saheli*, and the advertisements for 'Ecroz' (morning-after tablet) in *Grhalakshmi* segue nicely, then, with the discourse of life-journeys – actual and symbolic – that are also prominent in the pages of the magazines.

If *spaces* are significant in the making of the modern self, so is temporality an important context within the discourses that tie together consumption, sexuality and the 'New Woman'. Within the magazines, the management of desire at home is significantly an aspect of interleaving: it ought, ideally, to be located within specific material and temporal regimes of the consuming body. Only when it is in harmony with a new domestic order – of things, activities, and relationships – that it becomes available as a way of achieving one's full potential. The May 1998 issue of *Grhasobha* carries an advertisement for the Kotex brand of sanitary pads that captures this imagined realignment. It shows an attractive sari-clad mother – hair in a respectable bun, no make-up bar a *bindi* – hugging, and smiling proudly at her teenage daughter who, dressed in (what appears to be) a National Cadet Corp (NCC)[4] or Girl Scouts khaki uniform, stands in a gesture of confident salute (Plate 1). Part of the copy reads 'I want my daughter to keep up with the times! … she is out of the house for such long periods, and at 'those' times of the month I don't want her to be using those cloth napkins'. Intimacy and order, affection and achievement, and, sexual maturity and modern technique are here combined towards presenting a case for positioning the New-Woman-to-be as a person at home in the world. The valourisation of order and discipline – here represented through the para-military uniform – is significant in the context of the social characteristics of the reading public of *Grhasobha*, for it speaks to the lingering affection for the state (and its capacities) that is also a hallmark of the aspiring middle-class sensibility that is increasingly defined through consumer and lifestyle processes[5]. What is of significance in this text is the foregrounding of the law-and-order imagery for representing both *feminine* coming of age and the *female* body as temporally modern, a process usually reserved for the making of masculine identities. In this way, female

sexuality is unambiguously positioned within the realms of calendrical time, rather than consigned exclusively to a mythic (or religious) or primordial temporality. It is the underlying discourse of consumerist achievement – the education in foreign cuisine, laying the table in the correct manner, etc. – that makes such a temporal realignment possible.

Time also enters into consumerist modernity through explicitly aligning consumption itself as a matter of, to quote the title of an article' 'the most opportune moment', where 'if you see something you like, purchase immediately, you may not find it again', and 'Wednesday is the best time to visit the beauty parlour, the best time to ring important people is either before 1 pm or after 5.30 pm, and [Tuesdays and Wednesdays are best for grocery shopping]'.

Leisure, and the various spatial and temporal realignments that are aspects of middle-class identity, are crucially linked. However, a particular kind of 'work' is also required to be part of the new economy. If the street and the railway compartment become sites of new intimacies, then this requires a *constant* state of preparedness for the chance meeting, the passing glance, and the fleeting encounter. Lest the women who read MS, GS, and GL be – in their new environment – mistaken for those of the 'street', they must differentiate themselves in quite specific ways. In particular this requires close attention to – through perusing advertisements and articles on – cosmetics, gait, clothing, footwear, trends, styles, and knowledge of and interest in diverse cuisine and health regimes. The contemporary culture of modernity includes that of sexuality, however if modern sexual culture is not be identified as a 'common' one, then it must learn to move between the street and the home, the luxury hotel and domestic bed, and Indian food and foreign cuisine.

The Home and the Swirl: Sexology Darpan and Threshold Subjectivities

Surplus consumption is aligned to a particular subject position, one I will refer to as that of thresholds. This is an idea I will discuss through another magazine that is popular among the reading formation under discussion. This is *Sexology Darpan* **(**'Sexology Mirror'; Plate 2**)**. In the broader study from where this discussion is drawn my concern in developing the idea of threshold subjectivities was to problematize the

inside-outside schematic of anthropological theorising. Here, I will confine myself to comments on how the combination of contemporary sexual cultures, surplus consumption practices and threshold subjectivities lead to ideas about authentic Indianness.

I would now like to consider some of the ways in which surplus consumption and threshold subjectivities unfold in the pages of SD. Firstly, there is the constant dialogue between bourgeois aspirations of domesticity (for both men and women) and the attractions of the market which – through offering multiple subject positions – puts effective limits to the former and signals the appearance of a subjectivity that is one of passage between the 'home' and the 'world', that is of thresholds that blur the distinction between the two. And, it is also in this way that sexuality has become the site for a playing out of this sense of the surplus self, the all consuming citizen.

The cover of SD number forty-six of 1994 (**Plate 3**) is a collage of images that combines demure but modern nubility – the bridal gaze is directly at the camera – with other more ambiguous signs of the sexual. For the male reader, the elaborately ornamented young woman returns an inviting gaze. However, it is an invitation that stands at the intersection of socially sanctioned reproductive sexuality – through the framing device of the bridal get-up – *as well as* the possibility of an alternative inducement signalled through the contrivance of a filmic dance pose. A smile *almost* plays upon her lips, setting off the brilliantly seductive *tableau* of contrasts that the image aims towards. *This* is the sexual economy of surplus and threshold subjectivity where choices are never exclusive, and the offers to take part in it simultaneously demure but explicit, coy but unrestrained, and domesticated but also unruly. The inviting bride looks at the camera while elsewhere on the cover there is an inset a couple of indistinguishable ethnicity – Europeans? 'Cosmopolitan' Indians? – in the throes of sexual ecstasy. And – since lack is anathema – other parts of the cover are also filled up, empty spaces piled upon with other kinds of invitations in the shape of article titles; 'the double bed and you', 'the importance of sex', 'the horror of AIDS', and, in keeping with the promise of choice, the cover that carries the photo of the bride also lists a story with the title 'abortion: a serious investigation'.

The sexualized subject in *Sexology Darpan* is a figure of the threshold – an entity of passage – in as much as it is forever poised, always disposed, and consistently on the verge. The coquettish bride issue of 1994 was followed by others with articles on 'strange sexual events', 'the female inside the male, and the male inside the female', and 'sex and domestic love' (number 60, 1995); a 1997 issue with a two-third shot of a naked woman, arms up-stretched and water cascading down her body (fig 2), provided discussions on 'the six secrets of happy married life', 'sex and the new bride', and the 'the ill-effects of pre-marital sex' (number 90); number ninety-nine of 1999 carries a short story called 'a mistake' about a repentant wife who returns to her husband, having left him and their young son for a lover some three years previously. Appropriately, the prelude to the realization of her 'mistake' is an accidental meeting between the separated couple during a rail journey; as the train travels between one station to another, the woman's thoughts shuttle between the 'outer' space of extra-marital liaisons to the inner world of the home. *However*, the same issue also has an article on 'sexual satisfaction from touching' which discusses frottage in public places[6], and another on 'the science of sex-change'. Sexual well-being lies in the movement between 'here' and 'there', through a strategy of excessive consumption which makes one at home in the world.

Most of the back-covers of SD carry a particular advertisements from a prominent 'sex-clinic' in Delhi, the Ashok clinic, located in an area adjoining the railway station in Old Delhi. This brings me to my third site of discussion. 'Sex and Vitality Clinics', as they are sometimes also known, are, *in their present form*, mainly an urban phenomenon and have a large clientele of *men* (and sometimes, women) from relatively poor backgrounds. The clinics offer a variety of services to their clients: among them, 'cures' for sexually transmitted diseases, impotence, and premature ejaculation, ways of enhancing sexual 'performance', and the promise of male progeny. Clinic operators deploy medical and scientific terminology in conjunction with 'traditional' notions of masculinity, sexuality and sexual well being to attract their clientele. Sex-clinics are usually located near three kinds of places: major transport nodes such as railway stations and inter-state bus depots; newly established outlying suburbs which may contain a mixture of slum dwellings, light industrial units, and new and old concrete housing; and older and established commercial

localities, such as Chandini Chowk in central Delhi, and Dadar in Mumbai, areas that are also home to industrial and semi-industrial labour force from provincial areas.

In the Ashok Clinic advertisement at hand (on the back cover of Sexology Darpan), a newly married couple, both still in their wedding finery lean with their backs to each other, the woman looks wistfully above her, whereas the man's gaze faces downwards: 'Why should you remain dissatisfied?' the copy asks in bold red, and urges the reader/s to add 'colour' to their married lives. If one flattens out the magazine from the middle, so that the both the front and the back cover are visible in a single gaze, then, for number 90 of 1997, for example, the relay between the possibilities of a 'happy married life' and those of more disruptive sexuality become more clearly established (**Plate 4**); desire shuttles furiously between the home and the world, and the boundary between the two – notwithstanding its axiomatic status in social theory – is almost as easily undone as the staples on the spine that separate the back cover from the front.

Sex-clinics in India have historically been for the poor, however, increasingly, they receive clients from the better of sections of the population and this still of TV ad. (**Plate 5**) being shot at the Ashok Clinic premises will give you some idea of the new clientele. Ashok Clinic was one of my field-work sites. Above the large billboards for Asian Paints and Berger Paints, Yashica cameras and Tara Electronics, a huge painted photograph of Dr. Gupta – in tie and white business shirt – looks down upon the multitude in a manner that is both concerned yet distant (**Plate 6**); 'Dr. Ashok Gupta can be found on the second floor', a large sign reads, 'be careful of frauds'.

One on of my visits, I enter the clinic and waited in the reception while Dr. Gupta dealt with a patient. Cushioned and slightly worn benches line the wall and there is smaller room on the side in which a man and a woman in white lab-coats can be seen working at a desk. A window opens out to the street below, the light from which falls almost directly upon an electronic altar just behind the receptionist's head, its flashing lights illuminating the plastic gods and goddesses in contemporary homage; the *tableau* of Hindu plastic divinity in a sex-clinic so powerfully captures the easy *passage* between 'materiality' and 'spirituality' that these categories themselves risk dissolution. After a while, the clinic phone rings and the receptionist, a man in his

fifties, listens intently to the caller. Then, after a few minutes, he exasperatedly exclaims ‘this is not an astrology clinic, we are doctors!’. To the next caller, he offers an admonition: ‘you can’t get an opinion on the phone, you need to come into the clinic!’. Then, there is an international call from the one of the Gulf states. The caller is one Abdul Jabbar: ‘so, *you* are Abdul Jabbar’, the receptionist announces loudly. He listens patiently for some three to four minutes to what appears to be a series of complaints. Then, his telephonic empathy is at an end: ‘Our parcel has been returned’, he interrupts abruptly, ‘as it wasn’t deliverable, now you have to come to India to collect it’. As the receptionist busies himself with other tasks at hand, Abdul Jabbar is left to ponder the pitfalls of long-distance therapy subject to the vagaries of the postal system.

Moral Consumption and Retractable Modernity

Now to the final connected context of my discussion. The men who visit sex-clinic also form the readership for a kind of cheaply produced and very popular publications I will call ‘footpath pornography’. Hindi language foot-path pornography has a huge market all over North India. Generally, the booklets have quite poor production values (including missing pages and inexplicable endings to climactic narratives), and it is common practice to haggle over the ‘official’ price printed on the cover.; being an intrinsic part of the furniture of urban footpaths, customers can, literally, obtain these on the run, or opt for leisurely perusal while killing time waiting, say, for the next bus. Cover photographs often portray either European women or some version of westernised images of Indian women in various poses of desire/seduction or ‘availability’.

The ‘modern’ woman and her sexual adventures and appetites are staples of the fictional narratives in the booklets. I would like to suggest that for many urban poor men, footpath pornography images and stories of the modern woman are not just about the exoticised -- ‘other’ -- women in another place and time. Rather, they also say something about the corporeal desire for the goods of contemporary capitalism, as well as being sites where class is context of desire. To return to the couple-seeking-advice-image of plate 5, the modern woman is both an embodiment of modernity through being a desiring subject, *and* constitutes an object of conjugal desire by the

non-middle-class male for that very reason. Simultaneously, however, she is also a site of masculinist anxiety. Contemporary popular gender and sexual politics is, then, shaped by the overlap between a number of processes of modernity: the desire for the desiring woman in as much as this constitutes an even more intense participation in the consumer economy of the present, one allowing for a consumption of active consumer; and also, a fear of the consuming-desiring woman, one generated by her deeply ingrained – ingested – modernity that allows her the freedom to choose her own destiny, rejecting masculine strictures. It is in this sense that my opening remarks to the chapter referred to the scattering (and hence transformation) of desire into a number of sub-desires such that we can no longer say that we know *exactly* what the 'sexual desire' might be.

So, on the one hand, we have consumerist desire that also translates into erotic desire for the 'modern' consuming woman. However, on the other, there is also masculinist anxiety. Indeed, Hindi language popular print material – 'women's magazines', sexology magazines, footpath pornography – is full of warnings against the 'modern' woman. So, the imagined female reader of the women's magazines is often contrasted with another type that is implicitly understood to embody 'deep' modernity, a type that men are cautioned against, but considered deeply seductive. The latter kind, as several stories in these and other magazines narrate, is characterised by a power that basks in its ability to lead men to become entrapped in the miasma of an unruly and uncontrollable modernity. This brings me, finally, to a discussion of Tupperware sexuality that is surrounded by a moral discourse, where both men and women can be part of hyper-consumption as well as exercise control over the modernity they wish to be part of. This also contributes to the assuaging male anxiety about the consuming woman.

Tupperware sexuality – circulating among a number of invitations to consume – is distinct in as much as it presents *both as a good as well as a site of production under control of those who would consume it*. And, it is in this way that one particular section of the middle-class seeks to differentiate itself from another – the 'westernised' – group that has had a longer monopoly over the term. Finally, this differentiation through consumption occurs through the persona of the female consumer.

Let's first discuss the 'modern' woman whom men are routinely warned against. These may be women like 'Shirley', an archetypal modern woman who appears in a story called *Pyaar ka Bhoot* ('The Obsession of Love') in a footpath-pornography booklet written by the legendary – and perhaps non-existent – writer, Mastram. Shirley is a Christian from the South Indian state of Kerala, rides pillion on a motorbike and has a boyfriend called Tejinder. Through a series of events, Tejinder and Shirley meet and launch upon a relationship, the course of which progresses through many car-rides during which Shirley shares the front seat with her arm around her boyfriend. There are trips to Switzerland and frequent overnight stays in hotels where the lovers share passionate sex, whisky and that persistent symbol of the Indian modernist diet, the omelette; Shirley's modernity is, then, of an un-remediable sort, more than skin deep, having been ingested through whisky and omlette and now lodged deep within her innards. It is not something just for 'show'. Eventually, Tejinder, a naive but hardworking Sikh, is duped by Shirley and ends up in prison.

Now let us return to the pages of *Grhasobha*. In the pages of *Grhasobha* there are also 'modern' women, but not *so* modern as Shirley. In *Grhasobha,* when 'career women' discuss their sex-lives, it is invariably through the idea of *conscious* choice, stating that though enjoy it, they don't *need* it. This acts to differentiate the *Grhasobha* New Woman from those – 'westernised' ones – for whom it is an unconscious – uncontrollable – action, women such as Shirley. The *Grhasobha* desiring self presents as an agent of individualised management, a *making* that localises the wider vocabulary of industrial production processes to the economy of intimacy. However, it is a making that is constrained by the way women readers of the magazines are positioned in their specific material and social contexts. It is these contexts that, in turn, fashion the sense of the self as 'new' within the rubric 'New Woman'. And, the moral economy of consumption that surrounds the making of *Grhalakshmi* sexuality lies in the fact of this differentiation between the *moral* and *amoral* new-woman. This, in turn is enabled by the perception of control the moral – *Grhalakshmi* reading – woman is able to exercise over the production and consumption of the sexuality-commodity. It is this aspect that most clearly animates the magazines discourse of female agency and choice.

Being a subject of sexual modernity involves, then, a series of actions *over* choice, where the latter is seen as the ability to manoeuvre between the constraints, rather than be stymied by them: sexual modernity of *this* sort teaches the arts of give and take, both of which summarise agency and empowerment. It is the ability to exercise choice in a graduated manner, thereby exhibiting control over it, which differentiates *this* middle-classness from that of the 'purely' westernised (or global) one, which has no control, and is unable to recuperate an *Indian* self as it careers in a straight line trajectory, unable to loop back *at will*, and hence manifesting an inferior form of consumption[7]. So, while on the one hand, the household-magazine reader distinguishes herself from the 'common' culture of the street through an education in domestic etiquette, she also, on the other, is different from those who are *determined* by modernity. In this sense, she is truly in the middle, possessing the ability to take part in the thrills of the street and the instant cosmopolitanism of the five-star hotel lobby, but at all times, able to disentangle herself from both these contexts, and to come home; her's is a retractable modernity that is coeval with the making of the domestic space into a threshold arena through which she moves wilfully between discussions on anal sex and religious rituals.

It is the ability to *recuperate* – to envision agency as the ability to change track – that is, in fact, the grounds for the remarkably open discussions to be found in the magazines on supposedly taboo topics such as virginity, the role of the mother in teaching sexual etiquette to the daughter, and discussions of the sexually active older woman. The knotting of sexuality, virginity, and motherhood in the same reading-breath is made possible precisely through the narratives of recuperation and retraction – or, the idea of active agency – that circumscribe it. The *Grhasobha* reader is a voracious consumer, but is also able to return to her 'Indian' roots when required; her modern self requires an intense interaction with the world beyond the home, and she has the ability to just as easily come 'home' and take charge of the domestic sphere; she is the object of articles such as 'Menopause does not mean an end to sex-life', but also the active subject of religious rituals whose meanings are explained through the sponsorship of Liberty Shoes. Hence, for the 'good wife', there are no contradictions between this role and, in principle, enjoying anal sex. And yet, the crucial thing is that the making of a 'true' Indian-ness can only happen through an engagement with the global world of commodities and the idea of choice. For, it is only then, that one can

demonstrate one's control over consumption and choice, one that makes for the practice of moral consumption, and differentiates one from the hapless modernity of others who are controlled by it. Moral consumption is, then, a particularly pure form of consumption in as much as it can only be demonstrated through absolute allegiance to – and control over – the idea of choice over a number of goods, ideas, and strategies.

It also combines the idea of 'production' through the concept of self-making that such control is seen to produce. Notwithstanding our traditional understanding of 'Hindu perceptions of femaleness' (Wadley 1988:40), what we see here is the unmaking of the figure of the 'Hindu woman' that is also the making of new identities linked to the constitution of a moral middle class, one that is distinct in the ways it formulates recuperative agency *through* consumption. It is a subjectivity that neither fears the decline of 'tradition' nor the 'excessive' ingestion of modernity: for the graduated self moves in and out of different contexts at will, with full control, absorbing and setting aside with ease.

The potency of the magazine discourse lies, then, in the possibilities of an address that enfolds the reader into contemporary trans-national commodity culture at the same time as it allows an exit into an imagined and controllable 'local' culture. It makes the consumer a universal type simultaneously as it allows for differentiations; and, makes of the body an instrument, as it situates it in a moral economy of social structure.

---

[1] All excerpts from 'The Indian Woman', in M-E IQ, , Issue 1, volume 1, 2000, pp. 5-7. Authorship attributed to the 'McCann-Erickson strategic Planning and Consumer Insight team'

[2] Interestingly, an Indian writer of Mills and Boon inspired romantic fiction recently noted in the English-language *Femina* magazine that 'A survey reveals that Indian women do not like physical sex in books and prefer everything on an emotional level' (Adige 2000: 117).

[3] Hence playing upon the possibilities of the city as a 'human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet', (Sennett quoted in Bauman 2000: 94).

[4] The government run NCC scheme for school and college students replicates the structure of the defence forces in as much as the 'recruits' can opt to be in the army, the air-force, or the navy wing of the Corp. As students move into the work force, participation in the NCC is commonly highlighted in their CV's as a sign of their disciplined and responsible nature, and hence their suitability for positions of trust.

[5] Though this aspect can not be explored here in any detail, one particular manifestation of this is worth noting. This concerns the loving detail in which newspapers report the transfers and posting of Indian Administrative Service and Indian Police Service officers. It would be of social significance to record news-paper column inches devoted to how such and such Registrar of Co-operatives has been shunted

as the Cane Commissioner, and how such and such Superintendent of Police has taken over as Commandant, Home Guards. I am convinced that the interest in these matters goes beyond mere 'information', and extends to a deeply ingrained libidinous relationship with discipline and authority, and the state.

[6] 'In general, society considers this disgusting… and unnatural…. However, the funny thing is that even those who consider it a crime have not escaped it. If you travel in trams and local trains, you too must have experienced this irregular form of sexual satisfaction. …Women are also victims of touch-desire [*sparsh-kamita*] … finding occasion in crowds or in marriage function of rubbing and pressing their firm buttocks against young and old men' (Bhatnagar 1999:22-23).

[7] Whether the reference point for the *Grhasobha*/*Grhalakshmi* reader is the westernized Indian woman or the western woman herself (whose representations are now freely available through sundry American/European publications and television programmes) is an interesting point. Perhaps they are both objects of circulation, imitation, and rejection. In the material at hand, however, it is the westernized Indian woman whose proclivities are most often brought into discussion.