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Ritu Varghese

Vellore Institute of Technology-Andhra Pradesh University, India

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Book Review: *Sex, Desire, and Taboo in South Asia: Religion, Culture of Ability, and Patriarchy*¹

Reviewed by Ritu Varghese²

Tulasi Acharya's *Sex, Desire, and Taboo in South Asia* boldly explores the intersections of sex and desire as complex cultural constructs grounded in religious beliefs, taboos, and patriarchal structures in the South Asian context. Divided into six exhaustive chapters, the book identifies the cultural and historical interplay of sexual taboos and the moral debates surrounding them. The objective of Acharya's study arises from a paradox—while sex has historically been glorified in scripture and ancient sculpture in South Asia, sexuality and carnal desire have also been socially and politically controlled and delimited. Acharya contends that India and Nepal are both hailed as the birthplaces of popular sex manuals and ancient erotic architecture, yet they have also exercised patriarchal restraints on sex and desire as taboos. These nations, and others in South Asia, offer both a rich cultural heritage and contested discourses about sexuality that make them worthwhile sites for scholarly investigation.

Acharya engages with Michel Foucault's theories of sexuality and power to argue that sexuality is still monitored by mainstream South Asian societies to regulate social identities. Acharya also emphasizes the need to develop a theoretical framework to approach the discipline of sexuality studies within South Asia, as it historically has been ignored. Particular attention is paid to investigating the role performed by religion and culture in shaping the intersubjective approach towards sexuality in the region and in determining an individual's quality of life and livelihood. The issue is further complicated by gender dynamics established through patriarchy and imperialism. In this context, Acharya argues for a more liberal, inclusive dialogue on sex through scholarly interventions, particularly those of Gayatri Spivak, Georges Bataille, and Douglas Wile. In addition, Acharya underscores the importance of bringing subaltern narratives concerning sex and suppressed desires to light to counter dominant heteropatriarchal discourses.

Chapter 1 foregrounds the representation of sexuality in South Asia by drawing upon Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) for a comparative analysis. The chapter traces the development of sexual discourse in the region while maintaining that Foucault's theories are insufficient to the task because the South Asian context, unlike Foucault's Western context, is primarily governed by religious and patriarchal norms rather than by "capitalism and industrialization" (7). Chapter 1 also introduces George Bataille's *Eroticism* (1962) as a key text in exploring sex in relation to death and its sacred value. Acharya discusses the constitutive relationship between sexuality, eroticism, and sacred epistemologies in Hinduism.

Chapter 2 interprets sex manuals and erotic fiction as social practices that developed over time across many cultures. Focusing primarily on literary texts from Nepal, Bangladesh, India, and China, Acharya explores these texts' contribution to a liberal understanding of sex as a natural experience in the contemporary era. Chapter 3 then delves into personal narratives of the sexual experiences and aspirations of two contemporary individuals documented by the author: one is a man with a disability and the other is a man who hires a sex worker. Both men navigate the politics of ableism and sexual violence. Chapter 4 discusses the impact of Nepali and

¹ Acharya, Tulasi. *Sex, Desire, and Taboo in South Asia: Religion, Culture of Ability, and Patriarchy*. Lexington Books, 2024.

² Ritu Varghese is Assistant Professor in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Vellore Institute of Technology-Andhra Pradesh (VIT-AP) University, Amaravati, India. Email: varghese.ritu.roy08@gmail.com

Bollywood movies on the construction of sexual identities in South Asia. Chapters 5 and 6 underline culturally specific methods to study the nexus of sexuality, gender, and (dis)ability in the region. Acharya concludes with an urgent call to develop a more dynamic platform to unravel and address concerns pertaining to incidents of sexual violence that stem from cultural subjugation.

Acharya's book successfully discusses South Asian ideas about sex and desire in contradistinction to Euro-American ones and identifies how the overlooked nuances of the South Asian context require critical theoretical intervention. However, there are certain limitations to Acharya's framework that need to be acknowledged. The continual, overbearing comparison of "the East" and "the West" in this book seems strained in places, especially when Acharya blurs the lines between the Global South in general and South Asia in particular. Nevertheless, the book is a bold attempt at contributing to continuing dialogue about sex in cultures where expression of the subject is often suppressed or silenced. Hence, it will prove useful to students and scholars of gender and sexuality studies, as well as of cultural studies, and to readers in any region or nation where sex is still viewed as taboo.

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