

# LOVE AND SEX IN THE TIME OF SECTION 377: FANTASISING THE ‘OTHER’, THE ‘NATURAL’ AND THE ‘NORMAL’

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*The recent protests against the Supreme Court verdict on the constitutionality of § 377 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 were based on the argument that matters of sexuality between consenting individuals is a matter of private orientation and choice and hence the state has no right to intervene and criminalize them. While I oppose the state's right to intervene in consensual sexual relations, I want to argue against pushing matters of sexuality into the confines of private space and want to suggest instead that the normativity of sexual expressions should be debated more rigorously, not in the criminal proceedings of the court, but in the social, cultural and political spaces. Not only because the personal is political but because sexual experiences remain essentially a matter of phantasms, representations and imaginations and are hence necessarily collective and cultural. Critically discussing two ‘supposed to be’ taboo-breaking films on minority sexuality – *Blue is the Warmest Color* and *The Sessions* – I aim to show how heterosexual male fantasies, anxieties and biases resiliently and potently circulate in our culture and colour all forms of sexualities. The debates on the recent Supreme Court verdict should open up matters of sexuality for robust political and public deliberation, and in doing so, challenge the circulation of hetero-normative male fantasies intimately shaping ideas about (especially female) sexuality.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The so called problem of homosexuality – the problem of the acts of ‘gross indecency’ and ‘un-naturalness’ as they were called in the much discussed prosecution of Oscar Wilde and a half a century later Alan Turing – have been resolved in many parts of the world by normalising homosexual expressions as a personal and private matter, and hence no longer a criminal offence. The Wolfenden Committee Report in the United Kingdom in 1960 took the same position and recommended the state and the law not to interfere in the

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private sexual life of consenting individuals.<sup>1</sup> The Delhi High Court verdict of 2009 also took a comparable stand on calling § 377 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 unconstitutional because it interfered with the right to privacy of citizens.<sup>2</sup> Although the Delhi High Court went a step further than the Wolfenden Committee in making the state the custodian of the constitutionally guaranteed rights of the citizens, it nevertheless based its verdict on assigning the sexual expressions between two consenting individuals to the private realm. Recently, the protests against the Supreme Court verdict upholding § 377 as constitutionally valid<sup>3</sup> have acquired a similar tone – matters of sexuality are presented and represented as the private orientation/choice/preferences of the individuals and that is why, it is argued, they should not be criminalised.<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that the state and its ideological apparatus must vacate the bedroom, they must stop being the keepers of public and personal morality and must also stop judging and criminalising consensual sexual expressions. However, I want to argue here against pushing matters of sexuality in to the confines of the private space and want to suggest that they should instead be more rigorously brought out in public and debated as matters of public and political concern. For two reasons I find the assertions of sexuality as a private matter problematic.

*First*, feminists have struggled for decades to make the personal, political. What happens within the confines of the bedroom between two consenting individuals is as much personal as it is political, and in that political sense, it is a matter of public concern. Matters concerning sexuality – for example, what is normal, natural and unnatural – need to be publicly and politically debated for the democratisation of interpersonal sexual relations. In fact, debating sexuality is exactly what the Supreme Court shied away from in the recent verdict on § 377. Throughout the hearing, the Court was preoccupied with classifying the sexual acts that could be characterised as being “against the order of nature”.<sup>5</sup> The Court seems to have admitted that there is no uniform test that can determine such acts and the verdict is apparently based on the distinction between the sexual acts that involve oral, anal and imitative acts and the sexual acts that do not – the former punishable and the latter not.<sup>6</sup> This classification

<sup>1</sup> COMMITTEE ON HOMOSEXUAL OFFENCES AND PROSTITUTION, *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution*, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi, (2009) 160 DLT 277.

<sup>3</sup> Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation, (2014) 1 SCC 1.

<sup>4</sup> Naveed Iqbal, *Affairs of our bedrooms not anyone's concern, says LGBT community*, December 12, 2013 available at <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/affairs-of-our-bedrooms-not-anyone-s-concern-says-lgbt-community/1206900/> (Last visited on June 6, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> See Notes of Proceedings in Suresh Kumar Kaushal v. Naz Foundation (February 23 to March 27, 2012), available at [http://orinam.net/377/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SC\\_Transcripts\\_Hearings.pdf](http://orinam.net/377/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SC_Transcripts_Hearings.pdf) (Last visited on March 22, 2014) (For an unofficial transcript of the Supreme Court proceedings).

<sup>6</sup> Danish Sheikh & Siddharth Narrain, *Struggling for Reason: Fundamental Rights and the Wrongs of the Supreme Court*, XLVIII (52) EPW 14- 16 (December 28, 2013).

looks flimsy and uncertain. However, what is crucial is that in adopting such an uncertain classification, the Court strictly avoided the discussion on public morality upon which such classification should have been based.<sup>7</sup> What is 'normal', 'natural' and 'unnatural' needs to be debated, not in the criminal proceedings of the court, but in the social, public and political spaces. As a result of the Supreme Court verdict, the LGBT community has yet again been pushed against the wall to defensively argue that their sexuality is not unnatural. What is required, in fact, is a debate on the so called natural-ness of penile-vaginal intercourse which the Court has declared as the normative standard against which all other forms of sexual behaviour are judged. And, while we debate and challenge this hetero-normativity, minority sexualities need to be brought out of the closets of their bedrooms, accepted, and celebrated in public in order to compensate for centuries of marginalisation and criminalisation.

The *second* reason why sexuality is not a strictly personal matter is because sexual expressions remain essentially a matter of phantasms, imaginations, and representations. French sociologist Marcel Gauchet opines that "[sexuality is] something which one witnesses even when one is part of the scene".<sup>8</sup> In other words, sexual expression is something one imagines while it is being acted. And fantasies and imaginings are not always divergent from reality, neither are they escapism, idealism or illusion. But following Lacan<sup>9</sup>, they fundamentally shape reality, they are necessary vehicles to organise reality into a coherent whole. Furthermore, the ways in which sexuality is fantasised, imagined, and represented are cultural constructs and hence collective; they in fact link the individual to socio-political reality; they are an essential part of subjective identification. And their cultural and collective character makes them inherently political. For example, the massive proliferation of the pornographic industry and its inroads into popular culture such as cinema has fundamentally reframed the standards of sexual aesthetics as well as male and female aspirations of ecstasy. These pornographic and popular phantasms have increasingly reframed the contours of what is normal and natural and have become an integral part of all forms of sexual activity; intimately shaping the perimeters of pleasure. Some of these representations have redefined the normal and the natural and in fact have percolated into the didactic and medical discourses further reconfiguring interpersonal sexual relations. The influence of pornography and popular culture on consensual sexual expressions should be a matter of vital public concern in our times. What I want to argue is that the debate surrounding the Supreme Court verdict on the constitutionality of § 377 should incorporate the debate on the public imaginings of sexual pleasure, especially the way in which the resilient, subtle, robust, and omnipresent

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<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *Redefining the Unconscious* in THESIS ELEVEN 4-23 (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Jason Glynos. & Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and Political Subjectivity: Fantasy and Enjoyment in Psychoanalysis and Political*, Paper Presented at the 58th PSA Annual Conference (2008).

structures of andocentric fantasies and hetero-normativity circulate in our culture and colour all forms of sexualities.

In the spirit of debating sexuality, I want to engage here with two recent films on minority sexuality. My purpose is to show how these so called ‘taboo-breaking’ films are partially or wholly the projection of their directors’ heterosexual male fantasies, anxieties, and biases. *Blue is the Warmest Colour* is a film written and directed by French filmmaker Abdellatif Kechiche. It is based on Julie Maroh’s graphic (written in a comic style) novel on lesbian love.<sup>10</sup> The film was awarded the *Palme d’Or* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013. *The Sessions*, originally named *The Surrogate*, is a film about the sexuality of severely disabled people. It was written and directed by Ben Lewin, who himself is a polio survivor. The film is based on the article *On Seeing a Sex Surrogate* by Mark O’Brien, a California-based poet and writer, who was paralyzed neck down due to polio and who spent much of his life inside an iron lung. *The Sessions* is also widely acclaimed<sup>11</sup> and has received several awards.<sup>12</sup> I want to argue that while the films made claims to have broken the stigma around minority sexualities, they in fact end up representing a fantasised, heterosexual-male version of what the minority and especially the female sexualities could possibly be. And in doing so, the films end up perpetuating certain normative standards of what is natural and normal that the films should have in fact been challenging as claimed.

## II. BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOUR

*Blue is the Warmest Colour* is an intense tale of love between two women. Watching the film for the first time, I was moved and touched. But when I read the graphic novel by Julie Maroh upon which the film is based, I was startled by the way both the film and the novel begin with the same premise but then proceed on vastly different paths. I want to discuss these differences in order to answer the question that the annoyed director, after being criticised by women (lesbian women in particular), posed in an interview: “Do I have to

<sup>10</sup> JULIE MAROH, *BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOUR* (2010).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Stephen Holden, *Therapy at Its Most Touching*, THE NEW YORK TIMES October 18, 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/19/movies/the-sessions-with-john-hawkes-and-helen-hunt.html> (Last visited on June 6, 2014); Philip French, *The Sessions – review*, THE OBSERVER January 20, 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jan/20/the-sessions-helen-hunt-review> (Last visited on June 6, 2014); Roger Ebert, *The Sessions*, October 24, 2014, available at <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-sessions-2012> (Last visited on June 6, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Associated Press, *‘Silver Linings’ leads Spirit Awards with 4 prizes*, February 23, 2013, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/silver-linings-leads-spirit-awards-4-prizes-232752810.html> (Last visited on June 6, 2014); MSN Entertainment, *The Sessions: Awards and Nominations*, available at <http://movies.msn.com/movies/movie-awards-and-nominations/the-sessions/> (Last visited on June 6, 2014).

be a woman to talk about love between women?’<sup>13</sup> Let me discuss the film first and then the book to engage with this question.

Adèle is a high school student growing up in the 1980s in Northern France. Being in a relationship with a boy leads her to a depressed state. Amidst the homophobic culture at her school, she struggles to come to terms with the fact that she is attracted to girls. She meets Emma, a blue-haired, advanced art student, in a bar. They date, share sexual intimacy, fall intensely in love, and live together. Their relationship blossoms, but then begins to fall apart under the influence of their different class backgrounds and different career and life goals. The difference in the class background is portrayed through food consumption norms as well as the ways in which their respective families respond to and engage with their sexuality. Emma’s parents know and accept her sexuality whereas Adèle keeps her sexuality strictly secret from her family, friends and colleagues. The film depicts a close up of the slow progression of emotional distance between the lovers. They are slowly pulled apart and eventually have a terrible break-up after Emma finds out that Adèle had an affair with her (male) colleague. After suffering inconsolably for a while, Adèle makes an attempt to rekindle the relationship but is faced with the heart-wrenching reality that Emma was not only living with another woman but that she no longer loved her. For Adèle, the loss looks insurmountable. The intense experience of loving and losing transforms Adèle forever. The film ends on a sombre note when Adèle learns to be able to see Emma without getting emotionally rattled and walks out of Emma’s art show lonely and alone, but collected and composed nevertheless.

Various controversies have emerged since the film was awarded the *Palme d’Or*. The film is especially discussed for its protracted portrayal of sexual intimacy between the female characters. The scene has been evaluated in vastly contrasting terms. Some critics describe it as achieving a new height of cinematic depiction of sexual love, and the other side, mostly women and lesbian women have called it muted, cold, brutal, boring, surgical, relentless, voyeuristic, and pornographic.<sup>14</sup> In my mind, this is not a debate about how real lesbian sex actually takes place and how far the depiction in the film corresponds to such a reality. For me, this debate is about the way people with different sexual orientations and gender identities have perceived this depiction of sexual intimacy differently. It is about understanding and explaining this difference in perception. Julie Maroh, the author of the novel, in her detailed response to the film said,

<sup>13</sup> The Observer, *Abdellatif Kechiche interview: ‘Do I need to be a woman to talk about love between women?’*, October 27, 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/oct/27/abdellatif-kechiche-interview-blue-warmest> (Last visited on June 5, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> The Hollywood Reporter, *Lesbians React to ‘Blue is the Warmest Colour’: ‘Pretty Obviously Two Straight Women Having Sex’*, November 11, 2013, available at <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/lesbians-react-blue-is-warmest-655050> (Last visited on August 3, 2014).

“May be there was someone to awkwardly imitate the possible positions with their hands, and/or to show them some porn of so called lesbians (unfortunately it hardly ever actually for a lesbian audience). Because – except for a few passages – this is all that brings to my mind: a brutal and surgical display, exuberant and cold, of so called lesbian sex, which turned into porn, and made me feel very ill at ease.”<sup>15</sup>

After debunking the scene, what Maroh says next is most revealing:

“Especially when in the middle of a movie theatre, everyone was giggling. The heteronormative laughed because they don’t understand it and find the scene ridiculous. The gay and queer people laughed because it’s not convincing at all, and found it ridiculous. And among the only people we didn’t hear giggling were the potential guys too busy feasting their eyes on an incarnation of their fantasies on screen”.<sup>16</sup>

Another female critic wrote,

“Camera and its misuses in the well-regarded French entry [for Cannes Film Festival]...could fill pages. As the camera hovers over her [Adèle’s] open mouth and splayed body, even while she sleeps with her *derrière* prettily framed, the movie feels far more about Mr. Kechiche’s desires than anything else”.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, the scene appealed to a certain heterosexual male fantasy and corresponded to such pornographic depiction, and in so doing, did not advance an authentic and truthful account of sexual intimacy between two women.

However, how does it matter if the portrayal of sexual intimacy is a disappointment? What about the rest of the film? I liked the film when I saw it without having read the book. Reading the book, however, changed my view. The outcry about the heterosexual male fantasy framing the sexual intimacy between two women is not just about sex, the whole film is a betrayal to the lesbian experience so tenderly and movingly depicted in the book. The

<sup>15</sup> MAROH, *supra* note 10.

<sup>16</sup> Julie Maroh, *Adele’s Blue*, May 27, 2013, available at [http://sd-4.archive-host.com/membres/up/204771422545612119/Adele\\_blue.pdf](http://sd-4.archive-host.com/membres/up/204771422545612119/Adele_blue.pdf) (Last visited on August 3, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Manohla Dargis, *Jostling for Position at Last lap at Cannes*, THE NEW YORK TIMES May 23, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/movies/many-films-still-in-running-at-cannes-for-palme-dor.html?pagewanted=all> (Last visited on August 3, 2014).

key difference between the film and the book is that nothing would change in the film if the two central women characters were replaced with a heterosexual couple. It is a love story in which the protagonists just happen to be women; they could as well be a man and a woman. And in such a case, perhaps some details might change such as Adèle's encounter with the homophobic culture in the school, but the nature of the rest of the love story itself would not change much. But Julie Maroh's book is quintessentially a lesbian love story, a tale of two women in love; it cannot be grafted onto the heterosexual couple. Below, I point out the essential differences between the book and the film.

The book begins with Emma visiting Clementine's (Adèle's) parents after Clementine is dead. The story unfolds as Emma is reading Clementine's diary. As a young woman growing up in Northern France in the 1980s, Clementine faces the dictates of the hetero-normative world in which it is expected that a girl would only date a boy. So she does. But unlike the film, in which Adèle is depicted as having sex with the man she is dating, Clementine is not able to establish a sexual connection with the man she dates even six months into the relationship. She finally finds the courage to break up with him, but stays depressed for months. In the meanwhile, she fantasizes about a blue-haired girl she had met by chance in the street. She finally meets the blue-haired girl Emma in a bar and the duo are irresistibly attracted to each other. However, their relationship does not take off as smoothly as depicted in the film. That Emma is in a relationship with Sabine at the time is the least of their problems. It's Clementine's own loathing of her sexuality, her fear of abandonment, her shame, her unconscious wish to fit in the hetero-normative world – that prevents the lovers from being together. When Clementine's gay friend Valentin unintentionally declares to her (homophobic) friends that she had been to a lesbian bar, the ground beneath her feet breaks open and she falls into a bottomless pit. The only way she can cope with the hetero-normativity and homophobia around her is by denying that she was a lesbian. She ends up insulting and pushing Emma away even though she is deeply in love with her. It takes a while, involvement in a gay pride parade, considerable self-loathing, and substantial support from Valentin before Clementine finds the courage to get in touch with Emma again and also to accept that she is in love with her.

Emma, on the other hand, is far more accepting and comfortable with her sexuality, having gone through a similar ordeal in her previous relationship with Sabine. However, she is also reluctant to get involved with Clementine because she is afraid of abandonment, she is afraid that Clementine would leave her for a man one day. The two lovers are torn between their deep longing for each other and their fear of abandonment and self-loathing. They eventually fall passionately in love, but are driven apart again. This is because even though she is unhappy with her, Emma is not willing to break up with Sabine. Sabine had, in the past, provided crucial support and protection to Emma in a hetero-normative and homophobic world. Many moons pass before

Emma finally breaks up with Sabine and gets together with Clementine. But soon, their lives experience a massive tremor. Clementine's parents find out about their affair and both of them are thrown out of their house in the middle of the night. This marks the end of Clementine's relationship with her parents (at the age of 17) and prompts a rather pre-mature growing up. Eventually, both lovers start living together. However, over the years, they start to grow apart, not because of their class and careers, but because of their incompatible approach to dealing with their sexuality, especially Clementine's self-loathing. Emma celebrates her sexuality; it is something that draws her politically and socially to others. But for Clementine, it is still a secret part of herself that she is ashamed of. The shame she experienced on the night when she was thrown out of her parents' house when she was 17 still weighs heavily on her mind when she turns 30. And the buried pain and guilt, something that she could not control, drives her to become addicted to prescription drugs. Their relationship receives yet another violent jolt when Emma throws Clementine out of the house after finding out that she has had several affairs. This is the last lap of Clementine's long downward slide, and she becomes increasingly addicted to drugs. She spends several months on Valentin's couch in a depressed state. By the time she is reunited with Emma on Valentin's initiative, it is too late. She suffers from complications because of the drug addiction and dies.

Kechiche's Adèle and Maroh's Clementine go through contrasting life trajectories. Kechiche's Adèle is able to break free from her emotional suffering caused by the self-inflicted loss of love, and walks out of Emma's life rather victorious. Maroh's story tells us what it means to love, live and die in a hetero-normative and homophobic world. Maroh's novel operates at an entirely different level than Kechiche's film. In having his love story of two women interrupted by class and career Kechiche makes it sexy and acceptable for the majority-sexuality audience, but in the process ends up underplaying and glossing over the much deeper political and societal issue of homophobia and the way in which it can indelibly colour the relationship between two women.

To revisit the question that Kechiche posed – is it necessary that a director of a movie about lesbian love must necessarily be a woman? I would be inclined to argue that the gender of the director is indeed not as relevant as their ability to see like a woman, or in this case, a lesbian woman. And Kechiche could not suspend his hetero-male fantasies and anxieties in order to see like a lesbian woman. On that count, I would argue that the director failed.

### III. THE SESSIONS

The film *The Sessions* is based on severely disabled poet and writer Mark O'Brien's candid account of his experience of hiring a surrogate

sexual partner which he narrated in the article *On Seeing a Sex Surrogate*.<sup>18</sup> O'Brien was paralysed neck-down following an attack of polio and spent his adult life inside an iron lung. O'Brien's article is a thread-bare and honest account of his repressed childhood, his frustrated sexuality trapped in an iron lung, it's first unsettling and then exhilarating expression with the surrogate partner Cheryl Cohen Green.

The film is supposed to be about the sexuality of severely disabled persons like Mark O'Brien. However, I wish that it gave equal space to Cheryl Cohen Green and her unusual sexual journey as well. Green clarifies in her memoir *An Intimate Life: Sex, Love, and my Journey as a Surrogate Partner* that she is a surrogate partner and not a sex surrogate or a prostitute.<sup>19</sup> Green's memoir and the film educate us that a surrogate partner is a therapist who helps clients to come to terms with their sexuality and helps them acquire essential tools for building healthy and loving relationships. Green's own journey of becoming a surrogate partner and her professional experiences mark an important location in the history of sexual revolution in the US in the 1960s and 1970s. Green grew up in the sexually conservative and repressive 1940s and 1950s, and came to terms with her feminine sexuality during the time of sexual revolution in the 1960s. She eventually trained to become a surrogate partner and acquired a doctorate in Human Sexuality. At the age of 68, she is one of the few trained and practicing surrogate partners in the US at the moment. She firmly believes that "an honest, mature and nonjudgmental discussion about sexuality is needed" in our times and wishes that her memoir would encourage such public discussions.<sup>20</sup>

The film remains a sensitive and humorous account of O'Brien's sex life as long as it follows the article *On Seeing a Sex Surrogate*. The client and the therapist are working on a particular problem in the sessions – O'Brien's inability to control the timing of his ejaculations. This is owing not just to many complex things in O'Brien's world, but also to the fact that O'Brien has almost no experience with women in sexual situations. O'Brien wishes to have a partner in life and fears that his sexual inexperience would make him unsuitable for any willing woman. Green helps him overcome his anxieties and fears through sexual contact. And, O'Brien is a sensitive man; he does not treat Green as some kind of a prop to practice on; he is concerned about her pleasure too and this creates a momentary but still beautifully permanent bond of mutual care between them.

But, as soon as O'Brien disappears from the frame in the film and it deviates from his first person narrative, the film takes a rather disagreeable

<sup>18</sup> Mark O'Brien, *On Seeing a Sex Surrogate*, THE SUN (North Carolina) May, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> CHERYL COHEN GREEN & LORNA GARANO, *AN INTIMATE LIFE: SEX, LOVE AND MY JOURNEY AS A SURROGATE PARTNER* (2012).

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

turn. For instance, after the first session with O'Brien, Green shares with her husband (while being in intimate contact with him in bed) the fact of O'Brien's condition and how she feels about it. The husband replies – you are a saint! This characterization dislocates the surrogate from her concerned and caring individuality and puts her on a pedestal of an imagined ideal woman – she must be a saint because if she is not a saint, she is mostly a slut. Both O'Brien's and Green's narratives show that the contact between them was touching, caring, tender and non-judgmental in nature, and I wish the film strictly adhered to these two fascinating and candid first person narratives which unassumingly but bravely broke so many norms of the time.

But the creative expression of the director takes it to another level and makes it a contrived love story. It is not difficult to imagine that usually, in cases like this, a severely disabled person might become overly attached to the therapist, and Green expresses this very fear in her memoir. In real life, however, as per both their accounts, after 4 sessions were over, they maintained a tender friendship with each other and the therapeutic sexual contact did not snowball into a disproportional emotional attachment on either side. But the (male) director's take meddles with this narrative– it is the surrogate who falls in love with her severely disabled client and finds it very difficult to accept money as fee for her services. Personally, for me, this whole love angle, especially the way the female surrogate partner is portrayed, marred the beauty of the cinematic experience of engaging with the disabled and surrogate sexualities.

In addition, in the name of breaking the stigma around sexuality and disability, the film ends up perpetuating the hetero-normative regime of penile-vaginal intercourse as the most desirable and appropriate form of sexual expression. In *On Seeing a Sex Surrogate*, O'Brien describes in detail how the therapy sessions took place at a friend's place because he did not have a bed at home – he lived and slept in an iron lung. For the second session, they had to switch to another friend's place and this created difficulty in lowering and lifting him from his reclining wheelchair. O'Brien does not shy away from his disability and provides a human and humorous account of having a different body that did not fit into the able-normative technological world. But the film glosses over these details and follows a different path.

In the film, the third session takes place not at a different friend's place but in a motel. Here, the director creates curious caricatures to claim the desirability and normativity of penile-vaginal intercourse. Picture this from the point of view of the motel receptionist (projected as a hunky-looking, able-bodied, straight man) -- a young, attractive woman is pushing a reclined wheel chair in which is lying a severely twisted man. Another older but attractive woman is walking next to them. The young woman stops the wheel chair, approaches the desk and explains to the receptionist that her boss in the wheel

chair needed a room for two hours for a sex therapy session. The man asks, "What kind of sex therapy?" "Today after some appropriate foreplay they are going to try and achieve a full penetration", calmly replies the young woman. The man laughs nervously. The audience laughs as well – not at the man in the wheel chair, but at the man behind the desk, at his ignorance. The audience now fully sympathises with the twisted but lovely man in the wheel chair and his sex therapy. While the third session is going on, the man on the desk asks the young (attendant) woman waiting at the desk, "tell me truly, what are they doing?" "They are having sex", she replies with a cold piercing gaze. The man laughs again, not believing what she said. The woman further educates him in a placid, deep, clinical voice, "today they are going to try simultaneous orgasm". The puzzled man asks, "What's that?" The audience laughs again because it has already been made to empathise with the lovely twisted man and his sexual endeavours which include achieving "simultaneous orgasm" – whatever that means. To clarify, neither of the protagonists use such a term in their first person memoir. From the beginning, the film projects O'Brien's sexuality in uni-dimensional terms – achieving vaginal penetration and simultaneous orgasm. Later on, however, it becomes rather loud and didactic, reinstating the regime of penetrative sex as the only desirable expression of sexual pleasure – disable or not.

The Sessions, then, is a film which challenges able people's perceptions about the sexuality of disabled people, while at the same time perpetuating the version of heterosexuality that privileges the regime of penile-vaginal intercourse. O'Brien and Green, and also the director, are all products of the culture of sexual revolution in the 1960s. They owe their courage of adhering to unusual norms to the fact that they were accepted in this revolutionary culture and were not marginalized. The same culture produced the second wave of the feminist movement that radically reshaped the way in which female sexuality was perceived.

The important issue that created several acrimonious debates during this time was the matter of the female orgasm. Shere Hite's report on female sexuality, building on previous work, emphatically showed that 70 % of women did not experience orgasm through penetrative intercourse.<sup>21</sup> She showed that in a majority of heterosexual coupling, penile-vaginal intercourse worked only for the benefit of the male partner and the female partner had to be stimulated in other ways. This was not an entirely new point Hite was making. Earlier studies by Alfred Kinsey<sup>22</sup> and Masters and Johnson<sup>23</sup> had already raised similar points, but the attacks on Hite, after the release of her report, were so vicious

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<sup>21</sup> SHERE HITE, *THE HITE REPORT: A NATIONWIDE STUDY OF FEMALE SEXUALITY* 184 (2004).

<sup>22</sup> ALFRED KINSEY, *SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN THE HUMAN FEMALE* 376 (1953).

<sup>23</sup> ARCHER & LLOYD, *SEX AND GENDER* 85-88 (1991).

that she eventually gave up her American citizenship and moved to Germany.<sup>24</sup> *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*<sup>25</sup>, a book by another feminist Anne Koedt, came out during the same period, and has since become a classic. This was the period that triggered acrimonious debates on the nature of female sexuality, and the role of the vagina, clitoris, G-spot, and the (un)importance of penetration for the female pleasure. This movement is still alive and the debate has become even more complex. It has spread to many areas of knowledge-making, and has challenged several established orthodoxies, including the orthodox view in evolutionary biology on the role of the female orgasm in human evolution. This not only throws the basic assumptions of Darwinian Theory in jeopardy but would fundamentally question the whole ‘nature’ argument in the current debates on sexuality.<sup>26</sup> For instance, a substantial body of recent observations demonstrates that non-human primate female orgasms are rare in male to female copulation and most of the observed and recorded female orgasms occurred in sexual contact with other females, “in female-female mounting”.<sup>27</sup>

It is very strange that Ben Lewin, himself a product of the times of sexual revolution in the western world, has missed such burgeoning literature on female sexuality and instead embarked on the path of romanticising the normativity of penile-vaginal intercourse while claiming to challenge the misconceptions about disabled sexuality. Given that most of the time, a majority of women do not achieve orgasm during penetration, the idea of the simultaneous orgasm out of peno-vaginal intercourse is a pure fantasy generated by popular novels and cinema.<sup>28</sup> It has, however, not remained within the realm of fantasy, but has percolated into the medical profession where the inability to achieve such orgasm has been categorised as a dysfunction in both men and women. Such a woman is either called frigid or anorgasmic and the man is diagnosed with premature ejaculation. *The Sessions* breaks one stigma but in doing so ignores the substantial work of the feminist movement aimed to liberate feminine sexuality from the bounds of such fantasies.

<sup>24</sup> Time, *So Long, Uncle Sam: Famous Americans Who Renounced Their Homeland*, November 13, 2013, available at <http://swampland.time.com/2013/11/13/so-long-uncle-sam-famous-americans-who-renounced-their-homeland/slide/shere-hite/> (Last visited on June 6, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> ANNE KOEDT, *THE MYTH OF THE VAGINAL ORGASM* (1970).

<sup>26</sup> ELISABETH LLYOD, *THE CASE OF THE FEMALE ORGASM: BIAS IN THE SCIENCE OF EVOLUTION* (2005) (According to the classical Darwinian theory any trait that has no role to play in species propagation and reproduction eventually becomes extinct. Female orgasm has no role to play in the process of reproduction and hence it should have been by now extinct).

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*, 228.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*, 36 (Elisabeth Llyod, extensively referring to and discussing 32 studies with diverse ethnic backgrounds, methodological assumptions, and population size, summarizes in careful terms that “‘approximately’ 25% women always have orgasm with intercourse, while a narrow majority of women have orgasm with intercourse more than half the time. From the studies reported, roughly one third of women rarely or never have orgasm with intercourse, while approximately 23% ‘sometimes’ do.”)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to highlight three points. *First*, sexual intimacy is a special bond between two individuals. The machinery of the state has no legitimate basis to intervene or even police these forms of human expression, where they are between consensual adults. However, this does not mean that the matters of sexuality have to be pushed into the private realm. The debates on the recent Supreme Court verdict should open up the matters of sexuality to robust political and public deliberation, and in doing so, should challenge the hetero-normative underpinnings of the discourse that privileges the hetero-male actor. *Second*, the matter of sexuality is a construct of fantasy and representation which are cultural and collective. As much as we need to challenge the state's intervention in consensual sexual expressions, the circulation of hetero-normative male fantasies intimately shaping the ideas about (especially female) sexuality needs to be rigorously challenged. *Third*, it is not the "unnatural-ness" of homosexuality that is problematic in the Supreme Court verdict on § 377 but the fact that the court has tacitly made a normative affirmation of penile-vaginal intercourse as being the only form of legitimate sexual expression. If a majority of women do not achieve orgasm through penetration without some form of assisted stimulation then the normative regime of penile-vaginal intercourse that the Court declares as the only natural and hence acceptable form of sexual expression becomes minority sexuality. Therefore, the declared natural-ness and hence normativity of penile-vaginal intercourse needs to be questioned and not the un-naturalness of homosexuality.

