

Kink and Feminism – Breaking the Binaries

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Abstract This paper seeks to share what Bondage-Domination-Sado-Masochism/Kink might offer to feminist understandings of sexuality, gender and power. It has been written by members of the Kinky Collective, a group that seeks to raise awareness about BDSM in India. The paper addresses four key themes. The first theme relates to the subversion of gender and sexual norms in kink from a feminist lens. It challenges popular notions of BDSM which seem to reflect heteropatriarchy, evoking images of, typically, a cisman dominating a ciswoman, making her submit to his desires. The paper argues that this assumption invisibilises male submissiveness with female dominants as well as queer/same sex kink. Even if a seemingly ‘mainstream’ submissive role is chosen by a woman, it has the capacity to be feminist as roles and dynamics are intentional, discussed, negotiated and consented to by all involved unlike in ‘real life’ where power dynamics are rarely acknowledged. Since kink is solidly in the area of playfulness and experimentation, it also makes for a safe space for gender transgressive persons. The second theme addressed by the paper related to Kink, Feminism and Desire. It argues that kink enables a paradigm shift from consent for harm reduction to consent for enabling pleasure and the exploration of desires. It offers another paradigm shift, away from false consciousness to one that brings to focus on the unconscious. In this third theme of the unconscious, the paper challenges the false binary of sexual fantasies being ‘OK’ vs. ‘not OK’. The unconscious allows for a link between the personal and political such that our politics is less judgmental. Being in that space where our desires seem to collide with our politics might help challenge the overly rational framework of feminism and help us move perhaps from a politics of certainty to a politics of doubt. The fourth theme of the paper relates to the question of Power in Kink. It argues that kink challenges binary notions of powerful and powerfulness because submission is powerful and that it is precisely because the submissive submits that the Dominant can dominate. Using these four subthemes, we argue that kink can contribute to feminist thought and praxis in India.

Keywords BDSM, Kink, Power, Desire, Unconscious,

Gender, Sexuality, Feminism

1. Introduction

We in the Kinky Collective, a group that seeks to raise awareness about BDSM in India, believe that kink brings to feminist understandings rich insights. In this paper, drawing upon the contexts in India, we would like to share what Bondage-Domination-Sado-Masochism/Kink might offer to feminist movements. Using the concepts of sexuality and gender, consent, unconscious, and power, we examine what the kink practitioners may have to offer and add to feminist thought and praxis.

2. Methodology

The paper is not based on a research study. It draws upon experiences and reflections of members of the BDSM community as intersectional activists. For this, we must claim our location, rather than proclaim a distance or objectivity from their subject or research. So, This paper is informed by our individual experiences with kink, and with the women’s movement as well as queer movement in India. Even though we have engaged with all these movements, we have done so at different time periods and from different locations, of gender, sexuality and profession. However, we are from privileged positions of caste and class. We have tried to use our subjective locations, collective knowledge as well as our differences to strengthen our work. It is only fitting then to reference Donna Haraway (1), ‘Accounts of a “real” world do not, then, depend on logic of “discovery” but on a power charged social relation of conversation.’

Thus, the paper seeks to locate some of its arguments related to kink, gender and sexuality in the context of popular media, law, and, developments in the women’s movement in India. The discussions in the paper related to the unconscious also draws upon readings related to psychoanalysis. The identification of the ways in which

kink is perceived as well as many of the challenges to these have emerged from interactions that the Kinky Collective has had with a range of actors such as the faculty and students of universities, feminist and queer activists, media and mental health professionals.

3. Results and Discussions

Subversion of Gender and Sexual Norms in Kink as Feminist

‘The personal is political.’(2) In such a case, can a feminist identify as kinky or practice Bondage-Domination-Sado-Masochism (BDSM)? This section of the paper explores the idea that kink or BDSM allows for the subversion of gender and sexual norms and contests patriarchy in myriad, yet, connected ways. Positing that heteronormativity is one of the pillars of patriarchy, one can assert that it is the dominant social norm that legitimizes only heterosexuality. This also necessitates that gender is organized as a male and female binary, with both genders having to follow strict roles and expressions.

Juxtapose these patriarchal ideals against popular notions of BDSM, and they seem to reflect heteropatriarchy, evoking images of, typically, a cisman dominating a ciswoman, making her submit to his desires. Placing this in the cultural backdrop of consent in India, where mainstream Bollywood cinema consistently shows women as having no sexual agency, and worse still harassment, coercion or pushiness as the norm to obtain consent from a woman. In fact, the familiar trope is the demure, submissive heroine who is coerced or hapless.(3)

It is important in this context to note that once two persons enter a legally binding matrimonial contract, there is no scope to negotiate consent or to give consent, as, marital rape is not a cognizable offence in India.(4) Male pleasure is seen as paramount and female sexuality, sex positivity and desire is invisibilised and suppressed. The women’s movement in India is fighting for sexual rights for women, even as we have begun to recognize agency, instead of only patriarchy and misogyny even in unlikely places like sex work or dance bars. (5, 6) Hence, this paper seeks to highlight what kink and kink communities here might offer to feminist understandings of heteronormativity and power.

Sexuality and gender both are policed by the natal family, schools, institutions and the state. (7) Certain sexual acts and genders are more legitimate than others. As per Gayle Rubin’s ‘charmed circle’, the heterosexual, monogamous, married, cisman and ciswoman engaging in peno-vaginal penetrative sex is at the top of the hierarchy and sadomasochism is on the periphery as a deviant sexual practise. (8) Looking at the universal heteronorm of a cisman and ciswoman, some streams of feminism have

seen kink as subjugating women, referencing a female submissive-male dominant interaction. At the outset, this assumption invisibilises male submissives with female dominants as well as queer/same sex kink.

It is important at this point to acknowledge that kink is centered on agency, consent, negotiations and communication. Hence, a dominant or submissive role or a power dynamic is actively chosen and discussed. The devices of negotiations, roles and consent are in itself empowering to women, allowing proactive exploration and assertion of their sexuality. Even if a seemingly ‘mainstream’ submissive role is chosen by a woman, it has the capacity to be feminist as roles and dynamics are intentional, discussed, negotiated and consented to by all involved unlike in real life where power dynamics are rarely acknowledged.

Examining the role of the submissive in kink, one will find that the submissive can exercise power in different possible ways – expression of desire, setting soft and hard limits related to the variables of a scene, acts and parameters. The power exchange of offering control to the dominant is also set under limits set by a submissive partner. The submissive partner can stop a play with the use of a safe word. Negotiations allow for a wider range of acts and allow persons to talk about and experience desire and pleasure in a variety of ways rather. This approach not only centres continuous consent but also allows for pushing sexual boundaries and enabling acts that would in any other situation be violent.

While giving up power as a submissive can be subversive and empowering, it is also transgressive, not just for women, but for men as well. A male submissive female dominant can be read as an inversion of traditional roles, but, this equation cannot be so pat as a simple inversion or just as non-normative gender roles. Such a scene has the potential to free a male submissive from toxic masculinity or even masculine norms of actively “doing/performing.” For a female dominant in such a situation, it challenges the idea that a woman is a passive partner.

At a rudimentary level, kink is transgressive because it doesn’t limit the idea of sexual satisfaction to phallo-centric peno-vaginal penetration because it doesn’t limit desire or the erotic to just genital regions. This works in multiple ways – shifting the focus from male pleasure, male climax as well as destabilizing the most legitimate sexual act of peno-vaginal penetration. In a challenge to the nanny state, kinky practices may fall in the ambit of Indian Penal Code Section 377 that legalizes only peno-vaginal sexual acts.

Furthermore, this destabilises the very gender category of man and woman as understood in the mainstream. Kink practised among queer persons/ persons of the same sex destabilises gender in the same way, no equation is pat, and be it between gay men or a butch-femme dynamic between women. In fact, a kink scene may have multiple persons of

multiple genders, as kink is solidly in the area of playfulness and experimentation. Gender is deregulated. This also rewrites the script for heterosexual relationships by challenging heterosexuality and monogamy and in terms of gender too, as power exchanges and dynamics challenge dominant scripts of both femininity and masculinity.

Once desire is articulated without being constrained to genital regions, it makes for a safe space for gender transgressive persons. A solely peno-vaginal discourse alienates persons who may not use such language for themselves, may experience body dysphoria in various ways. In fact, a kink space has the potential to be affirmative for gender non-conforming persons, because a kink scene can and does challenge the mainstream gender expression as well as provide space for different self-identification(s) since neither sexuality nor gender identity need to be fixed. Because of a strong focus on negotiation and consent, kink is a space where non binary persons may feel safe to ask for particular words to be used for themselves, body parts or acts – this is a very powerful affirmation. Hence, the kink culture of, explicit expression of desire, playfulness, consent and negotiation enables feminism in praxis by challenging social norms and constructs of power, gender, identity and sexuality.

Kink, Feminism and Desire

As referenced earlier, the idea of consent in India is incredibly vexed. The term ‘eve teasing’ has been used extensively to refer to street sexual harassment in India. This term sounds harmless but ranges from being stared at, to cat called, to groping, flashing, or even beating.(9) This has been normalised and is seen as ‘boys will be boys’ or ‘men will be men.’ Many are socialised to believe that this harassment is a demonstration of masculinity or an expression of romance. Girls and women learn not to protest against such behaviour either because it is seen as normal or because they are victim blamed, or there is no easy recourse. The Indian women’s movement has long been challenging violence against women, ranging from molestation to rape by fighting for the idea that women have agency over their bodies and the right to say no. Kink adds to this discourse, as it centres consent. Moreover, BDSM enables challenging gender and sexual norms using consent - Consent not just to say “no” to the other(s), but also to say “yes” or “maybe”. And consent not just vis-a-vis others but also consenting to connect with parts of ourselves which we might not have known to exist, parts of ourselves that are not so rational/cognitive, but perhaps about the unconscious.

The normative understanding of these parts of ourselves that surface to the consciousness in forms of fantasies labeled as “Deep/ Dark/ naughty” will have us believe that they are inherently “wrong”, meant to be suppressed instead of accepted. Their exploration, when done with

consent, offers the possibility of the person “unbecoming” oneself by consciously choosing to push the boundaries, to shed off the taboos and to release one from the pressure of being a “good” woman or a “true” man.

BDSM offers to feminism the possibility of a **paradigm shift from consent for harm reduction to consent for enabling pleasure and the exploration of desires.** (10) This is made possible by negotiations, as equals, by those involved, before entering into any erotic dynamic, about what the approach and mechanisms of consent will be like prior negotiations of hard and soft limits (hard limits referring to acts that cannot be done at all and soft limits referring to boundaries that may be pushed), the safe word, usage of which will mean immediate termination of the act.

BDSM advances feminisms challenge to the victim mode by placing the responsibility for consent on all involved in the erotic interaction. This is the second **paradigm shift – moving from the responsibility of consent on the potential violator to responsibility for consent being on all persons involved, including those who decide to give up control or those who have traditionally not had the power to give consent.** There is a serious danger here of confusing this with the patriarchal pattern of blaming the victim. What we are arguing for here however is for all those involved to have the power to proactively enthusiastically give consent.

Consent is also about enhancing of pleasure and exploring our desires, wanting our boundaries to be pushed. Expressing our desires is not necessarily easy, including for us as feminists. The ‘good feminist’ can condemn slut shaming more easily than own up the sluttiness in herself. The BDSM community offers a liberating possibility since it places a premium on sluttiness, whether for men, women, non-binary or trans persons.

There is a need also to acknowledge the dimensions of fantasy and the unconscious in all desire, including kinky desires. For example, in that seemingly patriarchal nightmare of a woman kneeling in front of a man, it is not that woman submissives want to serve men because of false consciousness. If it was false consciousness then how might we explain away male, transgender or gender queer submissives? In fact **BDSM offers us another paradigm shift, away from false consciousness to one that brings to focus on the unconscious.**

Kink, Feminism and the Unconscious

In this section we would like to look at the interplay between kink, feminism and the unconscious. We will first focus on kink and the unconscious based on readings related to various ways in which kink has been understood through the lens of the unconscious by psychoanalysis. Subsequently, we will highlight the feminism in this equation based on an interaction that the Kinky Collective had after a presentation to University students and faculty.

One of the key challenges that the Kinky Collective has

faced in its interactions about kink with those outside of the Indian BDSM community is the belief that seen through the lens of feminism, kink is inherently patriarchal. We have argued that woman as submissive and man as Dominant is only one of the numerous permutations and combinations of sex/gender of those engaged in play that are possible in BDSM. We have also argued that even in this combination, as in all others, submission is based on consent and is empowering, rather than abusive. These nuances do not seem to be visible to those who believe that kink is patriarchal. We believe that insights offered by psychoanalysis might help counter the belief that kink is patriarchal as well positively contribute to feminism. Since these are conversations that we are just beginning to have within the Kinky Collective, it is too early to share learnings from interactions with those outside of the group, but we would like to share some insights from readings which are proving to be valuable in thinking through how the lens of the psyche might strengthen kink awareness.

We must at the outset acknowledge the highly conflicted relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis, if we are to examine the triad of feminism, kink and psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis and feminism have evidently had a tumultuous history. Freud, in particular, came under heavy fire from feminists for his theory of penis envy and for his phallogocentrism. However there are several feminists who have seen the contribution that psychoanalysis can make to feminism. Jacqueline Rose (11) for example has written how psychoanalysis “allows into the public arena problems of subjectivity (subjectivity as a problem) which tend to be suppressed from other forms of public debate. Feminist psychoanalysts have also drawn attention to the maternal body as the site of early eroticism in our lives, rather than the phallus. Julia Kristeva (12) writes about the struggle to be released from the “maternal entity” and “the sway of a power which is as securing as it is stifling.” Lucy Irigaray (13) turns to women’s autoeroticism and homosexuality to counter the phallogocentrism of male psychoanalysts. Helene Cixous (14) has written about feminine jouissance which “represents the traces of all the bodily pleasures that have been repressed the moment the infant must submit to the symbolic phallus.”

We would now to move now to looking at the other link in the chain, that between kink and psychoanalysis. Once again it has been a complex relationship. Different psychoanalytic thinkers have regarded sadism, masochism and fetishes in different ways.

One of the important contributions that Freud made was to show that sadism and masochism to the extent that they represented the ‘active’ and the ‘passive’ were a part of all human sexuality and not limited to a sub set of the population considered to be deviant. One can critique the ideas of ‘active’ and ‘passive’, particularly in light of submission in fact being powerful, but the impulse behind Freud’s formulation seems to take us in a direction which

recognizes the multiplicity of all human desire, rather than the tendency to box, and restrict sexuality into certain water tight compartments, some of which are then stigmatized. “In no way biologically functional, masochism and sadism put to extreme familiar types of passivity and activity and correspondingly masculinity and femininity – that are elsewhere normalized by convention in sexual relations between men and women. So rather than consign such perversions to types of illness or degeneracy Freud contends these erotic behaviours and preferences have a constitutive role in all human sexuality, particularly the heterosexual reproductive sexuality that the sexologists were often at pains to differentiate from seemingly unnatural desires.”(15)

One way in which psychoanalysis and kink have come together is in terms of the tropes of domination and submission being used to problematize these as erotic/love dynamics in relationships, as Jessica Benjamin does. However, in her book *Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin (16) fails to make a distinction between 'erotic domination and submission' and BDSM. She problematizes the former by arguing that domination and submission involve a splitting of the psyche's need for both recognition and assertion, which is rooted in the relationship between the child and parent. The child wants recognition for which she needs to surrender to the parent but the child also needs to assert in order to gain independence and autonomy as part of growing up. As an adult she continues to find it difficult to find both recognition and to be able to assert. In erotic relationships this translates into one party performing the role of recognition as the submissive and the other party assuming the role of assertion as the person dominating. She argues that the need for recognition and assertion are both within us, and we need to deal with this conflict within ourselves. Only then can we forge bonds in our love relationships without one party having to perform the role of the submissive and the other the other role of the dominant. While this seems convincing, our concern is she is collapsing this need stemming from within the psyche for domination and submission with BDSM.

In BDSM there is playing with domination and submission. This, like all else, must have some relation to the psyche. However the manner in which Jessica Benjamin (16) writes about the need for domination and submission, and problematizes it, she fails to recognize that in BDSM we play with these dynamics, we enact the fantasies of domination and submission. By play we do not mean that it is any less intense of course, far from it, we mean that there is an element of performance, a chink of self-awareness, without which there would be no conscious, agential giving up or taking of control. We fear that in problematizing erotic domination and submission psychoanalytic thinkers such as Jessica Benjamin might be misrepresenting BDSM as being inherently problematic.

Another way in which psychoanalysis has engaged with kink is to show how the need to surrender/dominate stems

from the psyche. In this sense psychoanalysis is well equipped to understand surrender and domination, although it usually limits itself to masochism and Sadism. An important exception to this is Emmanuel Ghent (17) who captures beautifully the impetus to surrender.

The Need for Surrender Stems from the Psyche

Ghent draws upon psychoanalysis to write about where the impetus for surrender might stem from. "The superstructure of defensiveness, the protections against anxiety, shame, guilt, anger are, in a way, all deceptions, whether they take the form of denial, splitting, repression, rationalizations, and evasions. Is it possible that deep down we long to give this up, to "come clean," as part of an even more general longing to be known, recognized? Might this longing also be joined by a corresponding wish to know and recognize the other?" Might surrender be "a *longing* for the birth, or perhaps re-birth, of true self."

Ghent writes that the need for surrender signals that "something deep inside is rent, a tear in the self, that unbeknown to its bearer, seeks healing." Ghent is referring here to our childhood struggles of having to separate ourselves from our primary caretaker (given patriarchy, usually the mother) towards greater autonomy. It is no surprise then that surrender involves "the fear of re-experiencing, and the wish to re-experience, the breakdown that has already occurred so early in life that it cannot be remembered." This is why surrender "may be accompanied by a feeling of dread and death, and/or clarity, relief, even ecstasy."

Surrender as Joyous

Contrasting surrender with defeat, for Ghent the term surrender conveys "a quality of liberation and expansion of the self as a corollary to the letting down of defensive barriers". As compared to resistance which serves "maintenance of the status quo", surrender can be seen as a "'force' towards growth". "It is an experience of being" totally in the present, where past and future, the two tenses that require "mind"... have receded from consciousness. Its ultimate direction is the discovery of one's identity, one's sense of self, one's sense of wholeness, even one's sense of unity with other living beings."

Broadening the Frame

Ghent broadens our understanding of surrender in many ways. He invokes another psychoanalytic thinker Chasseguet-Smirgel (18) who writes that such surrender does not affect "a relatively small number of people" but that it is a "dimension of the human psyche in general, a temptation in the mind common to us all." He also broadens surrender by taking it beyond the sexual. "The excitement of recklessness or dangerous, near-death activities is another, as is the pull to manifest infantilism and helpless demandingness. Both of these quasi-masochistic configurations—and there are

others—can be very intense and can function as disguised expression of the longing for surrender."

Challenging the Euro centrism of much of psychoanalysis, Ghent writes, "In the West surrender has meant "defeat." In the East it has meant transcendence, liberation. In the West "ego", as used in the vernacular, has meant one's strength, rationality, a very close relative, until recently, of one's self. In the East "ego" has meant maya, (dream, the illusion of one's self)..." Ghent also makes reference to gurus "which permits the disciple to yield, surrender false self, and therein have a chance at finding himself... The "ego," false self, "mind" wants to argue; the guru won't argue. He knows that all engagement at this level reinforces the strength of the "ego" (false self)... we are so impressed by our "ego," we need to find something or someone who so totally transcends our experience, whose presence is so total and affirming that we will take a chance on surrendering... He is an excuse, an ally for true self to come forth." While Ghent likens the guru to the analyst, one could also think of the Dominant in terms of the enabling role that she/he/they perform.

Ghent writes that his hunch is that "there is something like a universal need, wish or longing" for what he is calling surrender and that it assumes many forms. "In some societies there are culturally sanctioned occasions for its realization in the form of ecstatic rituals and healing trances. In other societies, perhaps most notably in Japan where the psychology of *amae* (19) is so central to one's way of being, something akin to surrender is experienced as almost universally desired and desirable."

This piece of writing by Ghent is also important to counter the myth of BDSM as patriarchal violence because he writes that surrender is "the longing to be reached and known, in an accepting and safe environment." It is precisely because BDSM is able to create that sense of acceptance and safety that we are able to surrender. He further helps us understand the difference between the reality of violence and the BDSM which we can understand as the enactment of fantasy. "The fantasy of rape is a foil for the disguised expression of the longing for surrender. Real rape, be it by the penis, or the "ego" (psychological rape, no matter how subtle), violently forecloses and, by not recognizing or not caring about the genuine longing, has deeply betrayed it."

To conclude, psychoanalysis, and in this particular case Ghent, can help us see how surrender cannot be understood through the lens of patriarchy, and how it needs to be seen through the lens of the psyche. On the hand is the image of the (pathetic, victimized) woman on her knees surrendering to the (evil, abusive) male Dominant and on the other is the frame of psychoanalysis which can help us see not just how a man, or a person of any other gender, not just a woman can find joy and liberation in surrender.

There are several reasons why the focus that kink brings on the unconscious is important for feminism. To come to these we would like to share an insight which emerged

from a talk and discussion on BDSM, by the Kinky Collective with law students in a University in Delhi. Many students were highly disturbed when we asserted that all sexual fantasies are permissible, including rape fantasies. Rape fantasies then seemed to become the theme of the rest of the session. The students were convinced that conferring legitimacy on such fantasies, particularly in the public realm, will result giving license to crossing over the “thin line”, an expression used several times, from consent to consent violation. It was also challenging to reconcile the thought that rape fantasies can be alright when they seem to be an expression of patriarchy.

Our response to these concerns included the following arguments 1) We repeated that all fantasies are okay. Not only was it okay for a woman to have a rape fantasy, it was also okay for a man, or a person of any other gender, to have a rape fantasy, whether of raping or being raped. 2) Sexual fantasies stem from the unconscious which does not obey our ideas of what is politically correct and what is not 3) Not talking about such fantasies has not helped us so far. Rape culture still flourishes. 4) Rape fantasy is a fantasy, it does not mean that one wants to be raped, or to commit rape, otherwise it would not be a fantasy. Like most fantasies, we might want to enact a rape fantasy, but this is completely different from wanting the fantasy to come true in what is called, our real life outside of the realm of the erotic. So, I might want my rape fantasy to be enacted if I can find others who will play out that fantasy with me. This does not mean I want to be raped.

Towards the end of the session, one of the students had asked how all fantasies can be legitimate when they are a product of social conditioning. And instead of repeating what we had already said a few times before, including the point that fantasies stem from the unconscious, there was a realization that yes, of course, there are links with the social. Fantasies are not just about the unconscious. However the link between fantasies and the social is not just that internalized, patriarchal social conditioning expresses itself in fantasies that may then be enacted in non-consensual ways. The link with the social and our fantasizing about that are impossible, illicit, or forbidden. More generally speaking, what society says is “not OK” is likely to be precisely the stuff of our fantasies. Taboos not only seek to limit desires, taboos create desires. “Prohibition eroticizes”, as the psychoanalyst Bruce Fink has remarked.

We realized, in what felt like a moment of epiphany, that we must not fall into the trap of fantasies being OK vs. not OK. It is very likely that the content of fantasies is not OK and it is precisely what society feels is not OK that we fantasize about.

Fantasies that are of the ‘not OK’ type might militate not just against what mainstream society considers being taboo, but, for feminists, what feminism considers being taboo might also be hot for us. This is part of the larger reality that there is no simple relationship between our fantasies

and our politics. It’s not just that fantasies might be impervious to our politics. Fantasies might even sometimes actually be almost a rebellion against our politics, because, the nature of desire is that we desire what is taboo. As feminists we scoff at most taboos that mainstream society seeks to impose on us. What could be hotter than to play with what feminism, which we respect and love, holds to be taboo.

If kink can create a greater space for consenting to ourselves and acting upon desires that are disturbing, might it offer the possibility that we as feminists need not be angst ridden about desires that seem to go against our politics. We will go so far as to argue that there is no contradiction between any sexual fantasy and feminist politics. There is also no contradiction between enacting any erotic desire and feminist politics, as long as one can find other adults who proactively and enthusiastically consent. In fact we would like to argue that connecting with taboo desires might strengthen our feminism.

Connecting with taboo desires might help us inhabit a politics that is less judgmental and more accepting of the unconscious. This might leave us open to sexual fantasies that would otherwise remain repressed. Our politics might root us ethically, so that, with consent, we are able to play out fantasies that might appear to be completely at odds with our politics, such as those that disregard mutuality and dignity.

Kink brings to feminism the crucial idea of ‘play’. The word ‘play’ indicates the unstated recognition of the space that fantasy occupies in our lives, of the psyche, of the realm of the unconscious, of that in our lives which does not follow rational logic, and that which certainly does not abide by political correctness.

Might there also be potential here for the feminist mantra of personal is political to unravel itself. Most often it is the political which informs the personal. It might be that kink can help the personal inform the political.

Being in that not-so-in-control and in not-so-rational space where our desires seem to collide with our politics might help challenge the overly rational framework of feminism (and that of all progressive ideologies). Yes, rational, despite emotion and affect. It might also help us question whether we have the necessary conceptual resources or frameworks to fully understand the problem at hand and, following from it, whether we have the political strategies to effectively deal with it and moving perhaps from a politics of certainty to a politics of doubt.

The Question of Power in Kink

We would like to conclude with some reflections related to how power operates in BDSM. These reflections are located in the recognition that kink does not operate in a vacuum and that there are caste, gender, religion, class, region, dis/ability and other factors at play. These factors also impact our ability to consent. But consent does allow

the creation of a certain erotic space in which power can be experienced very differently.

The process of exchange of power in BDSM doesn't negate one's agency, but rather affirms it when a person, aware of the risks and consequences, chooses to not be in control for any length of time, instead of the control being taken away from them through tools of patriarchy and heteronormativity, or alternatively, when a person chooses to be in control, irrespective of their gender, class, caste instead of being burdened with the responsibility of being in control. In the Indian context, the construction of masculinity cuts across caste, class, religion and disability and demand and enforce masculinity dependent on the show and exercise of control and power. This gravely affects ideas of sexual prowess and the idea that coercion, sexual dominance and control are the means of sexual engagement. [20]

Against such a socio-cultural backdrop, for a male submissive, therefore, the act of surrendering control to their chosen partner can be an empowering and liberating experience where he finds himself able to simply be himself without the pressure of performance of masculinity. Similarly, for a female submissive, the act of surrendering control to their partner who has been chosen by them and on terms that have been mutually decided up on is equally empowering because it brings with it acceptance of the sexual self of the person and puts her in control of her sexual and romantic choices. Even any element of coercion that can feature in a play session is consciously chosen by the person being "coerced".

To what extent there are learnings about the nature of power that BDSM has to feminism, if at all is a much needed conversation we hope this paper makes a contribution to. But within the BDSM context, with consent in place, what we as feminist kinky activists are struck by is that the way in which power flows is such that challenges binary notions of powerful and powerfulness. This is because submissives are powerful. It is precisely because the submissive submits that the Dominant can dominate. Also, submissives and Dominants alike experience the power of transcendence that stems from surrender to erotic energy, beyond the power experienced vis a vis another person. Power is in this sense larger than ourselves. It is a power that enables overcoming not just one's limitations, but also of transcending one's ego and boundedness.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we have sought to challenge the assumption that BDSM is antithetical to feminism, towards bringing a focus on what kink offers to feminism. In the Indian context, kink is still relatively underground and doesn't face baggage around feminism and kink as has been observed in the West. This also means that conversations

around kink and consent are nascent.

However, discourse around consent is critical currently as a few high profile legal cases have set precedents. "Appalling attempts were made to dilute the provisions of the rape law. These two callous decisions by two different High Courts, one after the other, dismantled the concept of consent, ripped apart the framework of justice as well as dignity of women and made a dent on the concept of autonomy of a woman. These verdicts show that patriarchy still prevails and that the sexist misogynist mindset within the court rooms has not changed." (21) We have argued that since kink is based on consent and negotiation it provides safety, agency and tremendous space for expression of desire by persons of all genders.

Kink poses a challenge to gender and sexual norms that seek to deny men the possibility of surrendering control and women the possibility of assuming complete control in the erotic realm. The dimension of play, in tandem with consent and negotiation, opens up the possibility of creating a safer space for gender transgressive persons. The expansion of the terrain of desire also pushes the boundaries of the existing understanding of consent, from the paradigm of harm reduction to one that includes erotic fulfilment. The other paradigm shift from false consciousness to the unconscious also offers to feminism the possibility of the 'personal' informing the 'political' in ways that might make our politics less judgmental and more open to doubt than a certitude that is out of sync with our realities. We conclude by raising a question mark on the binary of power and powerlessness in the hope that feminism's engagement with the realm of power might be further enriched.

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