

Ethics of RepresentAtION: Media and the Indian Queer

Sumanyu Satpathy

Emboldened by a greater public awareness of alterity and sexual freedom—whether through the technological revolution, globalization, accessibility, or for any other reason—playwrights, film directors, and the media in general in India have begun experimenting with representation of what arguably have been hitherto forbidden pleasures and ‘realities’. Alternative sexuality is one such taboo subject in Indian cultural history. Due to the same reasons, similarly, gay and lesbian groups have gained greater visibility, and are pressing for their rights, legal or otherwise. In recent media history, a film by the woman director, Deepa Mehta, *Fire* (13 November, 1998) brought to the fore the issue of female homosexuality in particular and homosexual life in general. However, cinema halls showing the film were attacked by rightwing political activists primarily because of its portrayal of two Hindu women in love. Some freethinking liberal intellectuals and public personalities objected to the vandalism, but the film generally met with the approval of gay and lesbian activists. More recently, another film *Girlfriend* (2004), the work of a heterosexual male writer-director, Karan Razdan elicited angry reactions. This time, though, the homophobic tirade against the film was matched by angry protests by many Indian queer activists against what they perceived to be the filmmaker's ignorance of, or utter lack of sensitivity toward the subject. They thought the film's depiction of lesbianism was a gross mis-representation of queer identity based on stereotypes which associated homosexuality with criminality and saw it as a pathological condition.

On 13 August 2004 two gay men, Pushkin Chandra and Kuldip Singh were found murdered in a posh New Delhi locality. The media showed an unprecedented interest in covering the murder case according it front page headlines, complete with pictures, and details of the victim's life. Such coverage too led to debates about gays and lesbians. In each of these cases, the focus of the debate tended to move away from the subjects proper, that is the film and the crime, to the role of the media in representing gay and lesbian culture in India. In response to the media coverage of the Pushkin murder case, gay activists such as Ashok Row Kavi pointed out how the media tried to use the

incidents to reinforce the stereotype of the queer community as criminal or depraved. On the other hand, Swapan Dasgupta, a journalist known to have rightwing sympathies alleged that the media was being unscrupulously manipulated by “pseudo-liberal queer groups” to diverting the main subject of the crime and punishment in the Pushkin case.

It is easy to see how the media’s handling of diverse areas of cultural praxis, movie production, viewership, crime and law etc, raises the question of representation. For such coverage inevitably centred around alternative sexuality, kinds of forbidden pleasures, rights, identities, ethics and morality; frequently appealing to the so called traditional Indian values. Not infrequently too, these debates would often be conducted within the domain of what are perceived to be “public morality”, as if the latter is untouched by any kind of culture-specificity. In all these controversies, certain questions were reiterated again and again: First, the issue of representation figured prominently; but not *representation* per se. That is, the media coverage was not so much about whether the cinematic representations were aesthetically satisfying or not in the case of the films. Nor was it about establishing the facts of the crime or pursuing justice. Further, and more relevant to my purpose, the media was constantly using terms such as ‘should’ and ‘ought’, and ‘ethical responsibility’. Indeed, these cases in India confirm what Marjorie Garber et al have said in their recently published book on ethics: “In the popular imagination, in the world of technology and scientific innovation, and in the contemporary political arena, in every newspaper and newsmagazine, phrases like “ethical responsibility” appear with startling frequency....”

How are questions of ethics and public morality being invoked as transcendental, universalist categories, without any clearly formulated ideas of what constitutes the ethical or moral in the Indian context? Does morality or ethicality pertain to the private or public domain? Does the legal involve the moral or ethical? How is the ethicality of one’s sexual choice of public importance? How does the case of crime and punishment become an occasion for public debate on the ethicality of a gayman’s personal life?

These questions cannot be adequately grasped, let alone satisfactorily answered, without clarifying some theoretical issues. Two key issues which figure in the title of my paper, I wish to take up for discussion in the course of the presentation. i. The idea of representation as it features in contemporary aesthetics and cultural studies and ii. The

question of ethics in postmodern philosophy. In what follows I also use the specific empirical cases of media representations of queer identity and culture I have already mentioned as a convenient peg on which to hang the larger philosophical debates around representation and the recent ethical turn in philosophy. In my paper, too, I attempt to deal with the question of whether, as alleged by queer theorists like Judith Butler, this ethical turn is a turn away from politics, and, finally, whether identity politics that queer theory is imbricated in or is in any way affected by, this turn towards ethics.

I

I first take up the question of representation in general/theoretical terms, keeping in mind the empirical case of the above mentioned controversies. In its most commonly used sense, representation has directly to do with politics in democracy or any form of representational government. That is, we use the term in this sense when, as Richard Dyer points out, we speak of how “a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of being spoken for and on behalf of.” Cultural forms make sense in wider terms of specific cultural codes. In contemporary philosophy, however, distinction is made between *representation* in the singular and *representations*, in the plural. The former is used as a conceptual category in which the term connotes the very idea of representation. That is, the problematic of representation vis-a-vis the exact nature of its relationship with reality. In aesthetic theory it is linked to the idea of art as imitation, but it differs from mimesis theory through the questioning of the very reality of which a given representation is supposed to be an imitation. This of course follows from postmodernism’s suspicion of truth claims in discursive practices, as well as the very inclusiveness of discourse. Representations are versions of a putative reality, and as such, any attempt to say anything about any given social reality by way of description constitutes the act of representing that reality. Hence the proliferation of representations against a singular putative reality. It is impossible to close the gap between representation and reality.

For Lyotard reason and representation are set limits by the incommensurability of language games; it is not possible for reason to understand everything through a representational system. In postmodern philosophy events are analyzed as phrases, and

again Lyotard asserts that events exceed representation in that no representational system can account for all phrases. Theories of representation theories have taken a Foucauldian turn too, which means that there is a constructionist approach to representation. Representations are not so much imitation or reflection as construction; they are discursive practices which are carried out within specific power relationships. There is a clear nexus between representation and power. Thus, when the “Other” is sought to be represented by the dominant self, power politics or ideology immediately comes into play. Since the mass media is of the dominant for the dominant and by the dominant, any insensitive media representation of a member of the minority group or the group itself runs the risk of using a stereotype, which is more often than not a mis-representation. Through reiteration a type becomes a stereotype. These, Dyer calls quite appropriately, I think, “media *fictions*.”, which are aesthetic as well as social constructs. In this sense, he says, “stereotypes are a particular sub-category of a broader category of fictional characters, the type.” It is through repetition of a kind of representation that the stereotype is born, and becomes a source of “knowledge”. In early stages of their self-representation, gay and lesbian writers and artists found it hard to escape from seeing themselves in stereotypical terms. Thus the use of stereotypes was common in films made in Hollywood in the 1960s and 70s, both by heterosexual and queer film makers and directors. It is in this context that the use of the term “stereotype” by members of the minority group, who object to dominant representations of their identity in the media needs to be placed.

In this sense, one can understand why *Girlfriend* has rightly been criticized by gay activists as having portrayed the figure of the lesbian as a stereotype. In this movie what passes for knowledge about the reality called lesbianism is based on cultural representations, “media *fictions*” of stereotypes. In fact the plot of the film is around the very formulaic representation that Dyer discusses in the context of the 60’s Hollywood. He says, “When [lesbians] are central characters...the tussle [is] between a lesbian and a heterosexual male for a sexually unformed woman the plot often ending with violence or murder”. In *Girdlfriend*, two women are portrayed first as friends, but soon they are seen as “more than just friends”, when one of them is shown as being feminine and vulnerable, and the other shown as sexually dominant and possessive. The latter is also represented

as a “mannish” lesbian, further conforming to the stereotypical butch-femme model. She is later seen as violent abnormal “other” as against a more acceptably dormant, “normal” “feminine” heterosexual woman. As the mannish lesbian turns into an envious woman, her body language too is shown as changed, acquiring a look that is fiendish, a female Jekyll-turned-Hyde. Finally she is shown as a deranged, depraved murderer.

The same, one might say, is the media representation of the Pushkin murder case. The comparison might seem outrageous at first sight, since the two belong to two disparate realms of discourse. But both are cases of representation of the other and both use the stereotype. Sex and crime are both popular subjects for a story, whether in art or journalism. When the two subjects come together the cultural site of their collocation promises even greater popularity, and hence marketability. Thus, in the case of the Pushkin murder, after a few lines about the scene of the crime, the media reports turn to the actual business of representing gay life in Delhi by reconstructing the life of the victim from different people. The public perception of the same “reality” is altered/sought to be altered with the representation of Pushkin’s gayness.

The moment the murder is committed, the details of the circumstances constitute the “reality”. However, since the victim cannot speak, the whole truth of that crime can never be ‘known’. When the ‘details are pieced together’ the story constitutes a representation of *the* reality, and as such, the First Information Report onward there will be a series of representations. But, since such representation involves reason, it cannot prevent proliferation of representations. As Lyotard says, difference is a disruptive force at the limits of discourse, indicating that no rational system of representation can ever be closed or complete, but is always opened up to forces (sensual, emotional, figural) that it cannot enclose within itself. It follows from Lyotard that even if the victim would speak, the emotional and passionate components of his subjectivity would not figure in the representation of the reality.

The media coverage of the controversies over the films and the crime is also about the act of reading of a given cultural text. Each reading re-presents the earlier readings, which themselves become texts. The two sets of activities seem to be two separate domains. One, an objective truth which is never known, the putative truth; the other its re-presentations in the form of reportage. But looked at closely, the second

process is what is already on from the time of the first discovery of the crime. Each time the crime is retold the so-called objective truth about the murder is being represented. In the case of a murder like that of a homosexual, the licit reports on the crime offer a platform on which “facts” about the illicit practice of homosexuality can be presented. What is being offered and what is being sought in the name of “knowledge” about the truth of homosexuality is, in Dyer’s terms again, media *fictions*. Since the representations in such cases are produced and consumed within the heteronormative matrix, they tend to stick to the shared cultural codes or stereotypes. Thus popular gay or lesbian representations in the Indian media induce in the target audience smile, curiosity, joke; and in the other, consternation. This is precisely why queer/gay groups in India protested against the representations of their identity in negative terms in the case of the Pushkin murder.

Even the police have a hand in reinforcing stereotypes, since they are as much bound by law as by public perceptions of types and moral conduct. Media reportage of statements by police personnel, therefore, is by way of corroboration of the reportage. Take, for example, the following headline on the Pushkin case: “Delhi Police today claimed to have solved the sensational murder of suspected homosexuals” is one of the headlines [(New Delhi, Aug 28 (PTI)]. Two epithets are interesting here. The murder is said to be sensational. The reason why the epithet should have been used is none other than that it involves the murder of homosexuals. The second epithet is in a way a gloss on this question: “suspected”. The term is used in criminal law to refer to action that is prohibited by law. The same report further quotes the statement made by the Police Commissioner, SS Paul on the motive of the crime: "From preliminary interrogation, it seems that Pushkin tried to click photos of Rajesh and Moti with his polaroid camera, which enraged the two and they stabbed him and Kuldeep." As Dibyendu Ganguly who knew the victims personally has said, the two victims, Chandra and Kuldeep, were “turned [by the media] into caricatures of the gay Delhi-ite, with a decadent life style that is totally removed from anything we can imagine for ourselves.” Resistance to such representations is political by implication. For not to protest would mean that abjection under the heteronormative regime would be allowed to continue. Gay, lesbian or queer identity politics are of course about such resistance. Thus after having considered and

rejected the idea of representational politics in a given political system, one returns to the idea of the politics of representation: from being political in a crude way, to being political in a not so obvious way.

But activists also raise moral/ethical issues in the context of media representations of their identity. Just as well. After all, they are also attacked on moral/ethical grounds. As Dyer observes, while dealing with the issue of representation of gay at a theoretical level under the rubric “Political”, Dyer observes that “‘Homosexual’ and ‘lesbian’ have been negative sexual categories, at best to be viewed pathologically, at worst as moral degeneracy....” Last year, Tejal Shah organised the first international film festival in Bombay, dealing with sexuality and gender plurality. Perhaps she had these controversies in mind when she said that filmmakers should be allowed freedom to make what they want. “But they should also **have some moral responsibility**,” she said. How is it that even in the context of the political, the issue of ethics and morality makes a frequent appearance? This directly takes us to the matter of ethics.

II

The recent shift in moral philosophy is no less radical than that of the theory of representation. Traditionally ethics has been defined as “the investigation of those systems which are the moral tenets intended to guide the lives of individuals in society.” Though philosophers would by and large agree with such a definition of ethics, in practice there has been a wide range of disagreements. But placed beside the recent postmodernist shift in ethics, certain common traits in this divergent traditional practice and view of ethics can be discerned. One is that ethical actions and dispositions are the free choice of discrete subjects. Beyond this, the definition of what is right, good, moral or ethical has frequently been treated as fundamental to a common human essence, irrespective of social, racial, or gender differences. At the height of liberal-humanist thinking, in the 19th century this stresses on individual conduct as the centre of the ethical and moral reigned supreme. This of course led to the influential work of GE Moore who argued that ethics is ‘undoubtedly concerned with the question of what good conduct is.’ Even Foucault devote his work on ethics to the consideration of the self. But of course this has something to do with his critique of ethics which followed from an external public law, an extension of the law. He goes on to point toward the emergence of a new subject, and

therefore of a new ethics, which would be based in new forms of community and co-existence. In a sense, the subject of his book, “Care of the Self” leans towards “Care of the Other”. But traditional consideration of ethics/good conduct being self-oriented, has been effectively reoriented by Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ethics involves an appeal to alterity. For Levinas, ethics is the sphere of transactions between the self and other. More crucially, he suggests that the ethical relationship between self and other is constitutive of the social fabric. Unlike Moore’s selfhood-oriented ethics, Levinas offers the view that the ethical relationship between self and the other is “constitutive’ of the social fabric. It is only as a result of one’s relationship with an-other that any sense of self can emerge, which in turn suggests that one always owes one’s identity to an-other. But as Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods say, both the old and the new can and do coexist. “What is at stake is not a conflict between ethical and nonethical criticism, but between different ethical approaches...;different ethical approaches—at the their most basic, the universalist, and the differentialist or other-oriented; and the conflict between these approaches is itself one of the most difficult and enduring cruxes” (p 5) For while our day-to-day judgments about how to live our lives and interact with others are generally the result of our having internalized the norms of a particular community, our interactions are inevitably engagements with ‘otherness’, meetings or non-meetings with those who, to some extent, will not share our beliefs and cultural history. Such a tilt in the field of ethics has tremendous implications for gays, lesbians and other oppressed groups—one reason why postcolonial critics like Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak have taken to ethical reading practices, moving away from the ahistorical and amoral phase of poststructuralism and deconstruction (of which, of course the “queer is a byproduct). For the members of any given dominant regime to adopt ethical stances would entail sensitivity towards the oppressed group. For it is no longer enough for the person to care for the self; rather it is imperative for such a person to define herself in terms of good conduct in relation to the other.

In contemporary debates regarding the ethical turn in philosophy, it is alleged, especially by Judith Butler that the turn is a turn away from politics. John Guilroy says that, “Discourse in the public sphere often seems driven by the political right, which sees all political questions in terms of an absolutist morality. In the light of this development,

any ‘turn to ethics’ must be regarded, at least initially, with suspicion.” The question Guilroy here fails to ask is, can the queer community ignore the ethical issue and survive on identity politics alone in the misuse of the ethical category at the hands of reactionary forces? He also fails to distinguish between morality and ethics which are being increasingly redefined as two separate domains in philosophy, the first being a choice between good and evil, and the second being between *goods*. Secondly, the separation between politics and ethics is questionable, as also that between political and moral philosophy. The debates in India are sparked off by the right, when the representations are politically dissident *re* sexual identity, gay or lesbian.

Now, taking a cue from the Levinasian formulation, I tentatively propose that media is one of those mediatory spaces where ethics operates. But it is also the very space where identity formation, construction, and representation are interplayed. With this redefinition of ethics and representation, it might be possible to think of ethics and politics not in terms of mutually exclusive domains, but as being integrative, and enabling.

III

Let us now return to the controversies with which I began my paper. As I have already said, the attack on gays and lesbians sooner or later harp on the ethicality of same-sex love by appealing to “our tradition”. In response to these, Indian queer theorists such as Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, and social/queer activists like Ashok Row Kavi appeal to morality not on the same plane but by striving to show how same-sex love is part of India's cultural heritage with hardly any history of homophobia. Which is a debatable claim; but that is another matter. They show how, it is not the subject of homosexuality or its representation, but homophobia, that is a relatively late entrant in Indian culture via Christian morality and British legislation. Right-wing activists claim otherwise; and routinely attack any explicit representation of gay life as a foreign import. Even gay activists such as Kavi says that it was the repressive British/Victorian ethic that introduced Section 377 making homosexuality a crime.

Apart from raising the same points, Tejal Shah points out that *Girlfriend* is pornographic and has been made entirely to give pleasure to heterosexual males. "All the negative popular myths about lesbians [have] been woven into the storyline, and I think it

will antagonise society even further, against homosexuals," she said. She also insists on the media being "morally responsible". Similarly, women's groups say that *Girlfriend* with its story about jealousy and hidden desire coming between two women when one of them finds a boyfriend - is "highly regressive." It will make lives for homosexuals even more difficult. This to my mind touches the crux of Levinasian ethics, which is other-directed. If any media depiction of homosexuality caters to the titillatory taste of the heterosexual audience, and thereby makes life difficult for the sexual minority, the media representation is unethical and hence reprehensible. In the case of several other media representations that I have not mentioned in my paper, related to lesbian couples especially, the stereotypes surfaced, and even parents of the couples referred to such marriages or escapades as signs of Kaliyug, or took them as jokes. The arguments in favour of public equality for homosexuals may sound like political sloganeering; the identitarian politics of lesbians and gays, as well as the queer theory of the likes of Butler and Sedgwick too might be strong politics of dissidence. But a cursory survey of the systematic and often cruel forms of discrimination directed at the sexual minority, the shame and degradation commonly experienced by lesbians and gaymen, supply strong reasons for the application of a Levinasian ethics to media representations. Such an ethic is pragmatic and relative; what is good is what is good for certain purposes, situations etc. Subjective or transcendental notions have governed traditional notions of the ethics for far too long. Postmodernism has at least taught us that such notions are hegemonic, and therefore unethical. As Colen Lamos has said, queer theory "is a fluctuating process of negotiation, an endless labour that entails debate as much as agreement."

Whereas queer activists in India raise the question of ethics concerning media coverage, they rarely probe the ethicality of queer conduct and ethics of representation of these identities. When Levinasian ethics are applied to them, it would follow that the other is now the dominant heterosexual society. When the minority responds to the majoritarian attacks, it must do so with the humility that the other too is different, and by insisting on its own claims it cannot ignore the other's. In the context of the representation of queer identity, one might conclude by saying that representation on both sides of the divide is both an ethical and political activity. The important point to remember here is that alterity in sexual terms also is far from being a homogeneous

domain in India. By insisting on an ethics of representation one is not turning away from politics, rather fighting a political battle against both the political right, which more often than not rides the moral high horse for *political* reasons, and the hegemonic regime of compulsory heterosexuality. Thus in the case of queer politics, the ethical is political.

References

Rainsford, Dominic and Tim Woods, "Introduction". *Critical Ethics: Text, Theory and Responsibility*. London: Macmillan, 1999

Lamos, Colleen. "The Ethics of Queer Theory" in rainsfor and Woods

The Times of India, Mumbai, India (<http://www.timesofindia.com>)
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/689382.cms>

Sumanyu Satpathy