

Concepts of masculine and feminine sexuality



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The Issue of “ The Unspeakable” In The Theoretical and Fictive Representation of Sexuality

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The unspeakable in the theoretical and fictive representation of sexuality traditionally refers to the weakening of masculinity and the empowerment of feminine sexuality. From a theoretical standpoint, the “ unspeakable” is the bending of gender lines, the empowerment of women and the abatement of male dominance. The unspeakable in the fictive representation of sexuality is the destabilization of masculine sexuality and the introduction of femininity in a male psyche. This includes literary methods such as the metaphorical connection of male psyches with the Oedipal Complex, homosexual inclinations and subservience to female characters. Books such as Michel Foucault’s The History of Sexuality examine the theoretical representation of male and female heterosexuality’s innate connection to homosexuality as the “ unspeakable”. The fictive representation of sexuality demonstrates the unspeakable as the switching of traditional gender roles and the application of sexual foils to personalities as present in Nella Larsen’s Quicksand. Aspects of the unspeakable also translate to racial representation as shown in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye; in order to understand the difference in sexuality’s representation in both theoretical and fictive media, one cannot dismiss race as inherently connected to sexuality.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) widely criticized the traditional, Judeo-Christian perception of sexuality as outdated and inaccurate, widely neglecting several aspects of sexuality. The greatest unspeakable in European society

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was the notion that sexuality existed outside of a procreative dimension. As society evolved, Foucault argued, it was not the proletariat, lower class traditionally viewed as immoral that wrought the several facets of sexuality on the world. Rather, it was society's "bourgeois or aristocratic" families who discovered "the sexuality of children and adolescents was first problematized [sic], and feminine sexuality medicalized [sic]" (Foucault 1978, p. 120). The changing perception of sexuality in Europe's upper echelons revealed an unspeakable aspect; namely, that women and children exuded sexual identities independent of the accepted norm of domestication and procreation. The presence of sexuality in women and children lessened the degree of male dominance, hence the "unspeakable" attribute. The male fear of a loss of influence in society was most pronounced in the upper class, the primary reason high society's families were "the first to be alerted to the potential pathology of sex, the urgent need to keep it under close watch and to devise a rational technology of correction"; "it was this family that first became a locus for the psychiatrization [sic] of sex" (Foucault 1978, p. 120). Patriarchal society's destabilization was the reason sexuality's existence in anyone than adult males was so widely reviled. The bourgeois considered sex to be frail, something that ought to be relegated within their society. The bourgeois fear of sexuality outside the male persona branched out, giving way to every unspeakable; more specifically, the unspeakable aspects of sexuality represented theoretically and fictively were based on any threatening idea that would compromise tradition. In what appeared to be a "struggle against sexuality," society evolved a strategy to take advantage of the sexualities of "women, children, and men" by gearing them toward the familial unit most accepted. Female sexuality, though

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disturbing the procreative process, was given a voice that aimed sexuality and desire for men to coincide with the nuclear family unit. Juvenile sexuality was exploited, encouraged to blossom because its final realization would be the familial, patriarchal household unit (Foucault 1978, p. 105).

In History of Sexuality, Foucault asserts that sexuality “ must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover” (Foucault 1978, p. 105). Sexuality develops independent of society, and each individual’s sexuality will evolve differently. Sexuality, Foucault argues, “ is the name that can be given to an historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (Foucault 1978, p. 105-106). From a modern theoretical standpoint such as that of Foucault, sexuality is represented primarily as a revolutionary social entity. The traditions of a Judeo-Christian ethic system would view sexuality as a divisive manifestation, an animal instinct that should be controlled in men and eliminated from women and children. The unspeakable, from a theoretical standpoint, was its mere existence in women and children; any deviance from accepted models resulted in a compromise of male superiority. There were two primary threats: one was the existence of sexuality that deviated from traditional male sexuality, and the second was the existence of empowering sexuality outside of the male contingent of society. Precedence

was always given to procreation; sex was meant only to create life, not to be used for pleasure. The threats to male dominance were clear, even in the queering of sexuality. Change is the most prevalent in the realm of the unspeakable, represented in theoretical sexuality as anything deviant from tradition.

Despite the spectre caused by multiple future changes to society, Foucault noted that it was “worth remembering that the first figure to be invested by the deployment of sexuality, one of the first to be ‘sexualized’ was the ‘idle woman” (Foucault 1978, p. 121). The “idle woman” was one given precedence and favour over her counterparts. She retained the domestic role of her predecessors, and was the accepted female figure within society. In her foil emerged the “nervous woman,” the woman afflicted with “vapours”; in this figure, the hysterization of woman found its anchorage point (Foucault 1978, p. 121). Theoretically, the unspeakable in female sexuality was that which strayed from the accepted patriarchal model. The “nervous woman” was actually the sexually empowered phenomenon of the alpha female. The problem with a sexually empowered female was the psychological impotence of a man who would fall under her influence. This psychological rendering is roughly equivalent to the metaphoric neutering of man and society.

Contrary to the traditional view previously stated, Foucault agrees that the neutering of the genders is potentially dangerous. However, Foucault recognizes the presence of sex in both genders, and also does not hesitate to divide the two into a gender-based dichotomy. He claims that if society failed to recognize the difference in gendered sexualities, it would create “

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sexuality without sex,” which effectively amounted to “ castration once again” (Foucault 1978, p. 151). He aims to show how “ deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures” (Foucault 1978, p. 152). The representation of the unspeakable here is countered by Foucault’s assertion that the unspeakable is a necessary part of society. In response to the historical construct of sexuality detailing the “ hysterialization [sic]” of women, Foucault defines the unspeakable of sexuality in three ways:

“...as that which belongs, *par excellence*, to men, and hence is lacking in women”

but “ at the same time, as that which by itself constitutes a woman’s body, ordering

it wholly in terms of the functions of reproduction and keeping it in constant agitation through the effects of that very function” (Foucault 1978, p. 153).

Representations of the unspeakable in fictive sexuality can also be attributed to race and gender, as evidenced by Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye as well as Nella Larsen’s Quicksand. The Bluest Eye’s protagonists’ encounter with Maureen Peal, a light-skinned black girl whose birth defects were ignored in favour of her fair complexion, demonstrates the phenomena of social racial aesthetics (Morrison 63). Most evident is Maureen’s denigration of the girls Claudia, Frieda and Pecola; Maureen subconsciously defends her birth defects as beauty because she is “ cute [and they are] black and ugly” (Morrison 73). The unspeakable component here is the empowerment of

white over black, but upon closer inspection it becomes the sexually empowered girl versus the sexually unwanted others. Maureen's birth defects would erstwhile render her unwanted by men and therefore a member of the weaker contingent of society. However, the social standard merits fair complexion over dark, empowering Maureen over Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola. Despite the fact that Maureen is technically a black girl, her proximity to the white race earns her the contempt of girls whose deep desires to be wanted by society represent the unspeakable. Maureen, though vilified in The Bluest Eye, is the least sexually threatening and exudes the least unspeakable characteristics. It is Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, who in their desire to be pale and possess "the bluest eye" aspire to have the power that Maureen flouts in front of them. The white race equates with power and masculinity, while the black race is the powerless neuter in the world Toni Morrison portrays. Similarly, Nella Larsen's Quicksand presents the unspeakable in sexuality with the racial and sexual dilemma of Helga Crane. A "despised mulatto" reviled because she could not be confined to a comfortable social norm, Helga embodies the unspeakable ambiguity traditional society feared (Larsen 1994, p. 5). Helga represents the same power standard as the white and black races portrayed by Morrison. If power can be ascribed to sexuality and the standard of male strength over female weakness, then Helga therefore presents to society not just a mulatto, but also a woman on the verge of becoming powerful. Larsen establishes this standard, describing such instances as shocking Helga. Helga, for example, "[shudders] a little as she recalled some of the statements made by that holy white man of God to the black folk sitting [respectfully] before him" (Larsen 1994, p. 2).

Helga's description in Quicksand is sexually favourable, suggesting the duality of a black woman becoming sexually desirable, crossing the borders established by society. Helga's attractiveness is described in several colour references, the first description made by the narrator evoking the sentiment that "an observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade" (Larsen 1994, p. 2). Helga is a manifestation of the disconcertment of a woman in a patriarchal society, as she "could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity" (Larsen 1994, p. 7). Not only is Helga unable to accept any stance on her race, she is also hard pressed to find acceptance for her sexual power. The same "parts of her that she couldn't be proud of" ironically "visualized the discomfort of James Vayle" in her "maladjustment"; she "had a faint notion that it was behind his ready assent to her suggestion anent a longer engagement than, originally, they had planned" (Larsen 1994, p. 7). Despite Vayle's family and their intolerance of Helga's familial and racial ambiguity, Helga's fiancé represents Helga's exertion of power over a man. With such odds mounted against his union to Helga, the logical assumption would be his abandonment of a relationship. However, Helga's identity as a black woman with white features empowers her to be desired by him; James cannot let go as he is dominated and has little choice in the matter. Larsen shows James' powerlessness, describing him as "liked and approved of" in the town of Naxos, but "[loathing] the idea that the girl he was to marry couldn't manage to win liking and approval also" (Larsen 1994, p. 7). Even Helga is cognizant of James' helplessness, as she knew "that a something held [James], a something against which he was powerless" (Larsen 1994, pp. 7-8).

The unspeakable factor in sexuality is multi-faceted. While all types of sexuality are different, they are all unspeakable in their common root as threats to heterosexual, male dominance. Theoretical presentation of the unspeakable is largely based on the existence of non-conventional sexualities, while fictive presentations manifest themselves in different media as shown in Morrison and Larsen's works. Though the scope of so-called sexual deviance is large, the general premise remains the same.

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