

Book Review

The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century.

AMIA SRINIVASAN, 2021.

New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 304 pp, £20.00 (hb) £8.99 (pb)

‘There is nothing else so riven with politics and yet so inviolably personal. For better or worse, we must find a way to take sex on its own terms’ (p. 88)

There are many reasons that sex is not a typical topic of dinner-table conversation. Discussing sex, sexual acts, or erotic media quickly evokes unspeakable private imagery that reflects social taboos in many cultures. For many, opening up about one’s sexual identities and orientations can stir up visceral reactions against self-expressions that do not conform to powerful sexual norms and ideologies. For others, the power dynamics of everyday sexual discourse can trigger traumatic memories and emotions, particularly for women who are exceedingly likely to have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives. Yet, despite this tense sexual milieu, Amia Srinivasan’s *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* beautifully navigates the muddy waters of sex and power as if it were the subject of a warm dinner-party exchange. In six engaging, relatable, witty, and thought-provoking essays, Srinivasan explores the practical and conceptual ways that sex and sexuality constitute a complex cultural discourse that constantly informs the practical nuances of consent, discrimination, freedom, punishment, and social power.

In *The Right to Sex*, Srinivasan skillfully strays away from the rigidity of abstract and ahistorical analysis. Instead, she grounds her critical inquiry with a conscious focus on the ways that sexual and patriarchal ideologies are exemplified in the everyday realities of our digital age. Drawing on a tradition of applied philosophy and critical theory that is rigorously attuned to the way that injustice and oppression manifest within mass culture, Srinivasan tells compelling stories about how the subjects and objects of sexual desire relate within particular material and social contexts. Examining stories from Grindr, Twitter, and Pornhub alongside accounts of more conventional situations from college classrooms, sororities, national newscasts, and parliamentary debate, Srinivasan dissects relatable contemporary narratives that will resonate with readers of relatively diverse ages, gender identities, sexual orientations and socio-cultural backgrounds.

However, while she emphasizes the methodological importance of intersectional feminist critique, Srinivasan leaves some ideological assumptions largely unexamined. For example, asexual identities receive little attention in the book, and while she extensively explores the dangers of accepting sexual preferences as pre-political dispositions, the book falls short of keenly examining the marginalizing normative assumption that experiencing sexual attraction or desire (at all) is a given. Taken charitably, this oversight is a missed opportunity for asexual visibility and recognition within sexual philosophical discourse; at worst, it is an omission that contributes to marginalization

by assuming sexuality. Further, Srinivasan offers little explicit discussion about how non-monogamous individuals and communities might fit into her politics of desire. Nonetheless, the overall diversity of thought and subject matter is a refreshing contribution that raises questions around sex, desire, identity, power, and ideology that are deeply underexplored in the White-dominant and patriarchal history of Western philosophy of sex. Srinivasan offers a vibrant and heterogenous feminist anthology that should be considered seriously by all philosophers and academics working to diversify their syllabi.

The Right to Sex is not just broadly accessible to the philosophically inclined – it is an absolute pleasure to read. Srinivasan’s sharp interjections and humorous quips are entertaining and present an invitation to more deeply consider the absurdity of sexual norms and ideologies. In ‘talking to my students about porn’, she discusses a British law passed in 2014 that prohibits ‘penetration by any object “associated with violence”’ among other pornographic acts. ‘Does a man’s penis count?’ she asks rhetorically, ‘presumably not’ (p. 58). During another amusing exchange about a metaphor proposed by Rebecca Solnit, Srinivasan declares that ‘Sex isn’t a sandwich, and it isn’t really like anything else either’ (p. 88). In ‘On Not Sleeping with Your Students’, she accentuates the pragmatic reality of gendered domination in professor-student relationships with an emphatic one-word sentence: ‘Perhaps there are some male professors who sleep with their students but are entirely unaroused by their status *as* students. Perhaps’ (p. 144). While Srinivasan’s philosophical style is compelling, her witty prose will appeal even to those who cast analytic inquiry aside for its typical dry and stuffy exchanges, or those who disparage modern critique for vague and obfuscated language. Writers from any discipline would stand to benefit from her routinely engaging, clever, and quick-witted style.

The Right to Sex is provocative, not definitive. For some, the lack of a cohesive or exhaustive theory may feel unsatisfying. However, for the practical philosopher, the importance of addressing nuance and context cannot be understated. Throughout her essays, Srinivasan exemplifies this intellectual virtue: by her own account, she is ‘unwilling to reduce what is dense and difficult to something easier’ (p. xiv). For example, Srinivasan challenges the normative primacy of consent, pervasive in modern sexual ethics discourse, while still recognizing the inherent difficulties of actually subjecting our sexual preferences to political scrutiny. Because our sexual desires can never be freed from internalized discrimination, she ultimately argues that consent is an altogether inadequate instrument for achieving sexual justice. Racism, classism, ableism, heteronormativity, and monogamy inevitably map onto hierarchies of desire and reinforce the kinds of marginalization that we should find disturbing. Perhaps this point is not novel; but, with eloquence, Srinivasan offers the reader an invitation to critique the politics of sexual preferences in a way that adds nuance to both the private and public sphere.

Amia Srinivasan does not offer a definitive feminist manifesto or a textbook on sexual politics, but nor does she try to. Rather, *The Right to Sex* is an example of applied feminist philosophy at its best. Srinivasan shows us that the tools of philosophy are not reserved for White men in the ivory tower – they are available to anyone wishing to understand their own experience of oppression, critically investigate the status quo, and reflect on the complexities of reshaping our inherited reality. In one of her finest works to date, Srinivasan inspires us to draw on philosophy to better understand our everyday

experiences of sex and to use the power of rational thought in service of the collective feminist movement to ‘transform the world beyond recognition’.

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