WOMEN AS FIGURES OF OBSCENITY

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"Why are women's bodies used to sell everything — from soap to cars — yet the same body is often labelled "obscene" when women express sexuality on their own terms?" This contradiction lies at the heart of understanding women as figures of obscenity, a category not fixed in nature, but constructed through history, power, and patriarchy. Obscenity is not a universal or timeless category. Literary scholar Ruth **Vanita** argues it shifts with historical and cultural context, while philosopher **Michel Foucault** shows how societies construct norms around sexuality to discipline bodies. In India, Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code legally regulates obscene material — yet even legal definitions mirror prevailing social attitudes rather than any objective moral standard.

In ancient India, the female body was revered rather than policed. The Khajuraho Temples openly incorporated erotic sculpture into sacred architecture, representing fertility, cosmological balance, and the life force. Art historians **Devangana Desai** (Erotic Sculpture of India, 1975) and **Vidya Dehejia** (The Body Adorned, 2009) argue these images expressed shringara rasa — love, beauty, and creation — not obscenity. The *Kama Sutra* similarly treated sexuality as a legitimate dimension of human life. Historian **Romila Thapar** confirms that ancient Indian attitudes toward the body were diverse and non-condemning. However, feminist historians argue this changed not through natural tradition, but through rupture — the gradual tightening of patriarchal norms in the medieval period, which transformed the female body into an object to be disciplined. **Kumkum Sangari** observes that patriarchal societies regulate women's sexuality to maintain social hierarchies and control lineage.

The colonial period proved decisive. British Victorian values — emphasizing modesty, sexual restraint, and rigid gender roles — were encoded into law and social reform. **Partha Chatterjee**, in *The Nation and Its Fragments (1993)*, explains the resulting ideological split: the outer

material world was conceded to colonial modernity, while the inner spiritual domain — the home, culture, tradition, and women — was claimed as authentically Indian and morally superior. Women thus became bearers of cultural authenticity, expected to embody national purity. This framework, as **Chatterjee** argues, allowed Indian nationalists to resist colonial domination without rejecting modernity entirely. Yet it also subjected women to intense moral surveillance.

Charu Gupta demonstrates that obscenity laws and censorship were deployed to control women's bodies while constructing the ideal of the respectable Hindu woman. **Tanika Sarkar** shows how nationalists positioned the Hindu wife and mother as morally superior — and consequently labelled dancers, courtesans, and actresses as immoral or obscene. **Mrinalini Sinha** adds that Indian reformers constructed a disciplined female identity partly in response to colonial portrayals of India as backward in its treatment of women.

Social reformers of the 19th century navigated these tensions with complex results. The Brahmo Samaj, led by figures like Keshub Chandra Sen, campaigned against *Battala* literature and *Jatra* performances, which they considered obscene. **Sumanta Banerjee** (*The Parlour and the Streets*) argues this effectively silenced the authentic voices of lower-class women in the name of Victorian respectability. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, celebrated for championing widow remarriage, simultaneously sat on the 1850s Committee for the Suppression of Obscenity and supported the removal of erotic passages from Sanskrit and Bengali texts. Sarkar notes this created a standardized, sanitized prose that marginalized the colloquialisms associated with women's oral traditions. Pandita Ramabai took a feminist path, attacking the Devadasi system and arguing that reform must restore women's agency rather than impose moral codes upon them. **Meera Kosambi** reads this as a feminist intervention protecting women from being turned into objects of obscenity. Journalist **B.M. Malabari** tied public obscenity at festivals to national degradation, arguing that a civilization fit for self-rule must reform its public behaviour — a position Mrinalini Sinha links to anxieties about national manliness.

Today, women's bodies remain central to public culture — but now primarily as commercial instruments. Campaigns by brands like Axe, Wild Stone, and Amul Macho openly sexualise women to sell products. Feminist film scholar **Laura Mulvey's** concept of the male gaze captures this: women are portrayed as objects for visual consumption rather than autonomous

subjects. As **Nivedita Menon** argues, gender norms in contemporary India are perpetually negotiated between tradition, nationalism, and consumer culture. From ancient temple art to colonial morality to modern advertising, the meaning of obscenity has continually evolved — but women's bodies have remained constant sites of cultural symbolism, social regulation, and commercial exploitation. The real question, as this history reveals, is not whether women are obscene, but why societies have so persistently needed to define them that way.