

Unspeakable Things: Sex, Lies and Revolution
Laurie Penny. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. 271 Pages

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This is a hard hitting and deeply unsettling book. Penny rightly says that it is a feminist book, “about a story of how gender polices our dreams” (p. 2). The book tries to unfold the covert underplay of neoliberal agencies and patriarchal structures on the current generation. It in no way helps the reader sail through or negotiate modern patriarchy. It is not a subtle critique or satire on neoliberal, patriarchal structures of society; rather, it aims at waging a revolution against them.

The title of the book is apt, as Penny does speak of things that are generally not spoken about. She does this ruthlessly, whether it is about the impact of neoliberalism in redefining feminism by creating a newer imagining of female beauty, of women starving themselves to death with severe eating disorders, or about the exploited poor women who are malnourished, overworked, or called overweight and ugly. The author says that her book is about “love and sex in austerity, about gender under neoliberalism,” where a body is just human capital and “Every personal choice, including democratic choice, must be subsumed into the logic of market” (p. 2).

She is critical of the feminism that matters to the media, which is the feminism most useful to heterosexual, upper class, white women and does not challenge the underlying structural problems of the society, which remains sexist and misogynist as it depends on the continued existence of sexual control, social inequality, and the unpaid labour of women and girls. Feminism, she says, is for everyone who talks of power, class, work, love, race, poverty, and gender identity. It is not just about liberating women from men but about freeing every human being.

Penny promotes a feminism that is for equality and social justice, is about freedom to love and redefine gender roles, a feminism that fiercely speaks against those who deny rights not just to white women but women of color and to all other marginalised communities. Penny dissects modern

feminism and class politics through her own experiences of upbringing, journalism, and activism in protest movements. The sexual assaults and rape of women activists in the camps and at the sit-ins of the Occupy Movement in Baltimore, Cleveland, Dallas, and Glasgow by male comrades is evidence of all pervasive sexual violence even by the agents of social change. There can be no socialism without feminism, proclaims the author of this manifesto.

Penny has a unique and provocative writing style in which she substantiates her sharp political analysis with autobiographical anecdotes which include her own experiences of eating disorder and mental health, cyber bullying for her bold commentary on patriarchy, and her experiences in protest movements. Her account may seem a bit repetitive, exhausting, and scattered at times, but it remains sharp and consistent in its politics.

The book is divided into five chapters that cover distinct but connected themes. The first chapter, “Fucked-Up Girls”, is about the voice of every girl who finds it difficult to live up to the standards of being a “nice, thin, submissive, good looking girl” or a “good woman.” “Lost Boys,” the second chapter, highlights how stereotypical gender roles are not only laborious for women but also for men. Masculinity, says Penny, is not in crisis; rather, masculinity *is* the crisis. The third chapter, “Anti-climax,” discusses sexual empowerment, which has no place for slut shaming, shaming someone who equals you in bed. Here she talks about the concerted cultural backlash against female sexual liberation. Commenting on sex education, she says that “Rather than teaching young girls about contraception and sexual health, we teach them shame” (p. 113). Also, rather than teaching young boys about responsibility, sex education teaches them slut shaming and suspicion. The fourth chapter, “Cyber Sexism,” talks about how the Internet initially came up as an equal space for everyone, but later made misogyny and body shaming routine, strengthened patriarchal surveillance and objectification of women in particular, and made bullying easy. The last chapter, “Love and Lies,” questions the sanctity of heteronormative, monogamous love that must end into marriage.

While highlighting contemporary gender issues, the book does not neglect to embrace the voices of girls who do not conform, sex workers, trans-women, queers, docile boys, thin and fat and ugly girls, old women, single mothers, and all those who challenge the free flowing construct of “Ideal Woman.” It probes the aspects of intersectionality, omnipresence of

masculinities, socialisation of girls into a culture of rape, cyber sexism quite well. It questions social privileges, mainstream feminism (which appeals to everybody and challenges nobody), asks for no small changes within the system, but complete mutiny.

The author talks of how both men and women are constrained by gender roles, but does not highlight the difference in the depth of the situation for each. While talking about violence, issues like the rape of men, and the sexual abuse of boys, who are the most common targets, are completely ignored in the chapter that discusses masculinities in contemporary times. The author, while talking of cyber sexism and the benefits of the Internet, touches the major impact of anonymity and disguised identity enjoyed by the users behind sexism online. The extensive role that men must play to combat structural violence and sexism is also not highlighted sufficiently. Despite the fact that author makes a cursory mention of the transgender and queer community, a profound questioning of binaries is absent and most of the commentary made is from the point of view of cis-gendered females. It is also written in an urban-western setting and is not up for generalisation to those societies that face extreme sexism, poverty, and deprivation in current times. For example, the working class women in India are malnourished, not by choice, but due to injustices and economic policies, so they are not large as their sisters in the West. The modern career women, on the other hand, are also malnourished to fit themselves in the re imagined concepts of beauty, seemingly by choice.

The book is refreshing, bold, and brutally honest and a must read for all the girls, boys, women, and men who care to think about transforming the society in the age of neo liberalism.

Biographical Note: **Sadhna Saxena** has been teaching in the Department of Education, Delhi University, India, for the past one and a half decades specialising in science education and sociology of education. She has also done researching on the area of *gender and education* and on *gender and science*. Her doctoral work investigated the relationship between political movements and education. She has research publications in above areas in Hindi as well as in English. sadhna1954@gmail.com