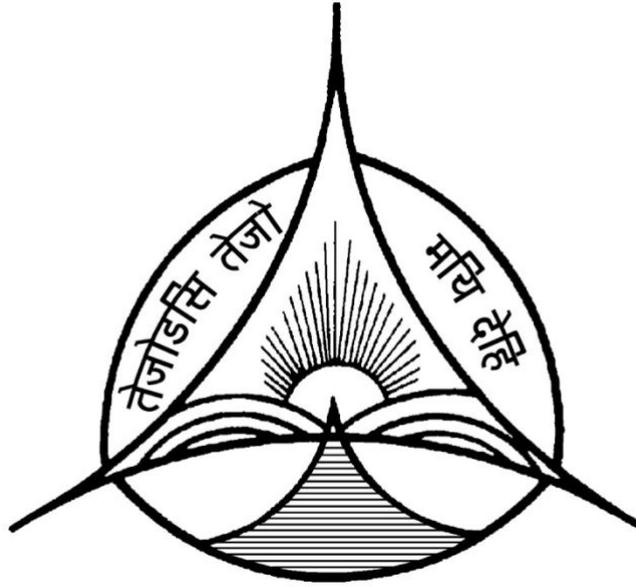


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Sex and Secularism by Joan Wallach Scott, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, pp.25, £22.95. ISBN 9780691160641, 9781400888580 (e-book)

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In her book, *Sex and Secularism*, Joan Wallach Scott challenges one of the main pillars of modern Western societies, secularism. She discusses the concept within the cultural and political contexts of Europe and America from the 19th century to the present. Scott is acutely aware that her approach to secularism (about which several philosophers and scholars have written extensively) is different in that she does not attempt to define the term. For her, secularism is not a fixed category of analysis, but a ‘discursive operation of power’ refracting through the prism of sex. Hence the title, *Sex and Secularism*. Secularism, for Scott, is a political discourse that changes within historical contexts and includes contradictions and oppositions, and in which the indeterminate categories of gender and politics are co-constitutive, deriving meaning from each other. She argues that gender inequality has been instrumental in producing the split between the secular/religious, public/private, masculine/feminine and sex/reason.

Using histories of religion, race, colonialism and literature by second wave feminists, Scott explodes the myth of equality associated with the term. In the 19th century, secularism was seen as a progressive alternative to religion. Scott contests the understanding that many—including women—have about the emancipatory role of secularism in removing women from the clutches of the traditional church in the 19th century. Secularism, Scott says, did not liberate women from the control of the church, but on the contrary, it feminised the church. More importantly, she points out that ‘*gender inequality was fundamental to the articulation of the separation of the church and state that inaugurated Western modernity*’ (p. 3). Secularism rooted gender inequality in biology rather than in Divine law to naturalise women’s inferiority. Soon science provided the guarantees given by religion. Scott argues that ‘the uncertainty of life without god was resolved by separating sex from death’ (p. 73). Women’s reproductive ‘natural’ biological role therefore acquired greater significance. The stress on reproduction privatised the family, women’s sexuality and children, and brought them under the control of the state since birth, death and marriage certificates became necessary.

In her book, Scott provides new insights into how secularism has been interpreted and mobilised since the end of the 20th century. She states that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of religion as a strong political and social force, secularism now stands for ‘Christian’ liberal democracy, and religion for Islam. Any religious (Islamic) excesses should be curtailed in the interest of the public by the Western liberal (Christian) democratic forces.

Secularism’s marketing of itself as a concept based on equality, freedom and reason associated with democracy has placed the white race—particularly the white male—in a position of global superiority. Scott argues that this has created a schism between reason and culture. In this split, the former is associated with Western modernity and freedom, and the

latter, with retrograde tradition and oppression. The discourse of secularism in the 19th century about the asymmetrical arrangement between the male and the female, Scott points out, has now been reoriented towards the different fate women in the West and in the East face. After the 9/11 attacks in the US, this binary has been foregrounded more boldly by pitting the West against Islam and its unequal treatment of women. In doing so, she argues, Western societies not only fuel *Islamophobia* which feeds into Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilization' rhetoric between Christian democracy and Islam, but worse still, erase serious inequalities upon which modern, Western societies have organised their economic, political and social structures that have subordinated women in multiple ways.

In the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the discourse of rights—which includes violence against women—has also emerged very strongly. Women's sexual liberation is most important in the emancipatory discourse for gender equality in the West, making sex pre-social. Desire is played upon by the consumerist market, making non-Western nations align themselves with the neoliberal agenda of the West. But what is most problematic for Scott is the fact that there is a contradiction created in women as both subject of desire and object of male desire without addressing the hierarchical social structures of their entrapment. Scott asserts that with the emergence of the rights discourse and the foregrounding of the sexual body in the context of sexual democracy, although spaces for homosexuality have received a lot of attention, it has nevertheless depoliticised women's liberation agenda. The emphasis on desire while removing the boundaries between the public and the private has homogenised women across dividing lines in multiple contexts, erasing racialised and structural inequalities between women of the West and East.

Scott's book is compelling in its critique of the sexist nature of secularism, but she often falls into the same trap in her approach to the term that she critiques in other theorists and scholars. While stating that secularism is not a set of transcendental principles, Scott herself uses the present as a prism through which to look at 19th century approaches to the term. It is this de-historicising that partly explains the fact that she does not address the legal and political realities that surround the term in its varied historical contexts. Again, her critique of over determining the sexual body in women in present times while incisive, in that it allows patriarchy to distract women from the structural, societal inequalities, erases the use of sexual bodies in creating new spaces and sites of contestation at the micro level. Women, in using their sexual bodies to express a distinct subjectivity of their own can, through these biopolitical acts, show forms of resistance to the hegemonic global systems of power, particularly in unsettling the law of the father. A feminist practice that does not rapidly reformulate itself with the unfolding politics of a fast-developing world, however problematic such a reformulation may be, runs the risk of not only losing its force, but also its potential to change the discursive practices that structure society.