

I am a man of 55. And I have a problem, or, should I say, I have had a problem, because I think I have almost licked it now. That's why I seem to have got the courage to write about it. I think a lot of other men also have this problem, or maybe have had this problem and have perhaps solved it in their own ways. They might be interested in reading about my solution, as I would be interested in reading about theirs. Perhaps I am wrong, though I think it'll take a lot to prove this, or maybe I am right and they are wrong, in which case I should try to explain how I've come to these conclusions.

Before I describe my problem, let me first say something about myself so that any misapprehensions about my 'character' may be laid to rest at the very start. I am an academic man, a professor at one of the IITs (Indian Institute of Technology), and I have had a fairly successful academic career. My profession demands that I do a lot of thinking, and that's where the root of the problem lies — but I welcome it. In personal life, I am a happily married man — for more than thirty years now. My wife is not too unhappy with me — in fact, as maturity arrived, we have become very fond of each other, in our own special ways. We have three children — one daughter and two sons. Our daughter has a good academic career. Recently she got her doctorate and also landed a husband and a job and they seem to be quite happy, which makes me think we did not bequeath her any undesirable genes. Our sons are still young and studying, doing reasonably well, and therefore we do not have more than the usual share of little worries and tensions. I do my academic work with great elan and devotion, and my wife looks after the house, and specially the garden, with similar elan and devotion. Let me also state that we have been fully and totally faithful to each other. And if I

# Confessions of a Male Ingénue

## Love as Manipulation

Prajapati Sah

detect a smirk in the audience regarding my own loyalty, I think it'll be soon clear why the smirk is a bit premature. In fact, after the following account has been read, the audience may even sympathise with me for being some sort of a male ingénue.



Let me now end the suspense and state clearly what my problem was — I had almost said 'is' so strong is the hangover. Not surprising in view of the fact that the problem has lasted with me for almost my entire adult life — since I was almost 16 till about — why, only the other morning. Almost forty years!

Simply stated, the problem was this: I suffered from a guilt complex, which in turn, gave rise to many smaller guilt complexes. For these forty years, I have carried out my usual duties at work and home, I have travelled within the

country and abroad, delivered lectures to audiences big and small, sat on committees and attended conferences, taught classes, held interviews, and decided fates. I have often transformed myself into a dutiful citizen and a good social being, sympathising with and helping friends and relatives in trouble, and often seeking and receiving help when help was needed. In other words, I have pretended to be a man perfectly at peace with himself. But the guilt has gnawed at my soul, torn at the edges of my conscience, and I have often felt that I am incomplete, that deep down, I suffer from a deficiency which I am fated to carry with me to my funeral pyre. I have never spoken about it to anyone, not even to my wife — in fact, above all others, not to her.

Unfortunately, I never have had any male, or, for that matter, female friends. Almost all of my acquaintances have been academics, who, more than people from any other professions, tend to be highly individualistic, and like to keep up a formidable facade of being totally self-contained, with an undisguised contempt for people who reveal their weakness by talking about their emotions and guilt complexes to others. Or, at least, so it has always seemed to me. As a result, these self-doubts have been building up within me, forcing me to find company within myself. I have held endless dialogues with myself, believing, rightly or wrongly, that all the final answers

eventually must come from within myself.

The inadequacy — I believe it's my guilt-ridden conscience which forces me to delay its mention even when I feel I'm now ready to do so — is the feeling bred in me — at quite an early age — that I am incapable of love. So, now you can realise how damaging it would have been to me had I mentioned it to anyone, anyone at all. Let me make it more specific. It's not that I see a small child — my own or someone else's — up to his or her usual heart-stealing tricks, and I do not feel suffused with a feeling that makes it hard to stop myself from picking it up and smothering it with kisses, a male of the species though I am. It's not that I see a young girl or boy sick in bed, suffering from asthma or bronchitis, let us say, which rocks his/her lean frame with spasms of cough, and I am not moved to impotent rage at the sheer injustice of God. It's not that at moments like this, I'd not throw everything else aside, no matter how important and urgent, and stay by the child's side, if that could bring the child any comfort. In fact, I do believe that there is some transparency about these feelings in me which draws little children to me, and I cannot ever thank God enough for the fact that my own children, grown up as they are, still ask for me when they are in need, or in pain.

I could say the same about other people, grown up, adult people, were it not for the fact that our adult world provides very little chance for interaction except on business. As long as my aged father lived, I pined to do whatever I could to relieve his boredom and loneliness. My mother expired even before I became an adult, and I suffered from, and still suffer from, pangs of guilt that I couldn't do enough for her. For my other relatives too, despite the distance and the self-

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centred existence which a modern style of living has forced upon us, I have enough feelings and regard for them that I don't hesitate to reach out to them whenever I feel that they might need me.

I have deliberately tried to avoid using the word 'love'. But are the feelings that I have described, the urge to respond when you feel someone needs you, 'love'? Do I feel this way because I 'love' them?

I assure you I have no desire to play with words. If it's love, it's fine with me. It proves that I am capable of love. In any case, it was not this kind of love I had in mind when I said that I felt I was incapable of love. It was the other kind of love that I had in mind — the 'love' between an adult man and an adult woman. If instead I spent so much time talking about love for kids and love for one's parents and relatives, it was only to establish my credentials as a man not devoid of feelings, or of 'love', if that is what it is. And I hope you have accepted my credentials. If you have not, then I'm sunk, and you need not read any further.

My problem will however remain, and I must continue what in any case I see primarily as a dialogue with myself. So what happens now, when I find that,

***In my adult life of about forty years, I have never been able to develop what is commonly called a romantic relationship with a woman***

though capable of feelings, I am incapable of love for an adult woman. Did I marry my wife without ever having loved her? Do I still not love her? Well, that's what I half-believed that I believed till recently, though I felt otherwise. I felt that there was a catch in it somewhere, and that it wasn't really like that; that it was my understanding of myself that was at fault; that I had not analysed the whole thing carefully enough, that, whatever else I may or may not be, I could not be such a big hypocrite as to deceive her, and deceive myself.

In my 'dark' years I was slightly comforted by the fact that many other men, good men, great men, famous writers and artists, thinkers, philosophers, and scientists had often voiced an apprehension similar to mine — though maybe in different ways. Some said that there was no such thing as love between adult men and women, some said 'love' was only for women, some others, like me, said they felt incapable of loving. And then there is the enormous folklore and jokelore in which serious doubts are cast on love, it is ridiculed, it is dragged through the quagmire of man's lust, and hung out to dry on the ramparts of sheer pornography.

'Of course, I love you, my dear,' says the harassed husband in the cartoon, 'It's my duty to love you.' 'What is love?' asked the Jesting Pilate, goes another joke, and couldn't wait for an answer.

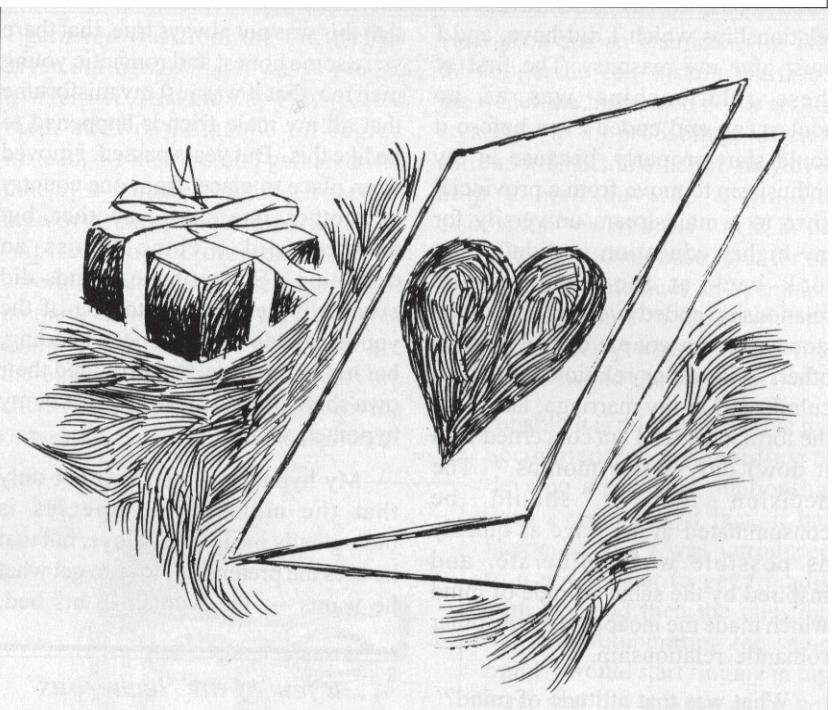
Where do the champions of pure, platonic love stand in this dirty war? Do they still want to pretend there is such a thing as love that draws a young man and a young woman together before anything like sex appears on the scene? Is there such a thing as 'love at first sight'? Those who coined this phrase were rather coy about what happens to that love at the second and

the subsequent sights. Aren't there endless experiences of betrayed women where all the tall talk of love ended at the first missed period? Why do we then still insist on talking of love, writing stories and novels about it, and making absolutely ridiculous films aimed at making young girls believe that since the last jilted girl committed suicide, or lost her innocence in a sleazy abortion clinic, 'pure love' had been rediscovered in a hilly vale, or in the elder brother's (or sister's, as the case may be) wedding *pandaal*? After every story of a young woman reduced to pulp by love, there comes the story of a glorified pair of lovers which gives new life to the young ones' disappearing faith in romantic love. Is it just possible, then, that there *is* love, and only we do not know about it? That some people do actually feel it, and it is just too bad if some others can't?

I am not about to give up, though I am ready to make one concession. I had started by making a personal confession, though I suspect I may have voiced the confessions of a large number of honest and honest-to-goodness men (I regret I cannot speak for women). Now, to advance my argument, I will take the stance of a logician trying to prove a theorem, or a philosopher trying to prove a hypothesis. My first hypothesis was: 'There is no such thing as love' —where *love* refers to the kind of romantic adult-man-to-adult-woman feeling I have talked about above.

I will now modify this hypothesis to: 'There may be some such thing as love, but given our present predicament, its true nature is doomed to remain a mystery to us.'

I can now hope to win over to my side at least the less 'diehard' among



Rustum Vania

the young women, the ones with fewer stars in their eyes.

However, I cannot help remarking that their attentions are not crucial to the present argument. Youth is not the age when one is very keen to uncover the true nature of love, but were it so, much misery would be spared, most of it to our young women.

But what *is* our predicament? Why can't we discover the true nature of love? Since this piece has been inspired entirely by personal experience, let me return to it once again.

In my adult life of about forty years, I have never been able to develop what is commonly called a romantic relationship with a woman. Not when I was a young student at an Indian university, not when I was later a dashing young don at the same university, not again when I became a maturer and generally well-liked

student at two different British universities, not again when I returned to India to start teaching at a fairly well-run and thoroughly Americanised institution and continued to do so year after year. This was despite the fact, mind you, that at least in some of these places there had never been any dearth of romantically-inclined beauties whose affections I could have easily won over, had I been able to sort myself out first. But the desire did not even spring within me, for already at that stage the guilt complex had begun forming inside me and it grew larger and larger as time progressed.

Lest I, a married man, be accused of being less than truthful in making the claim that I had never had any kind of romantic relationship with a woman throughout my adult career, I must straightforwardly discount two relationships which I did have, and I must give my reasons. The first of these relationships was as an

adolescent, and ended even before it could start properly, because in my enthusiasm to move from a provincial town to a mainstream university for my higher education, I didn't even look back at the girl, and the relationship ended even before we had stood within a couple of feet of each other. The other relationship which culminated in my marriage, lasted (in the form in which I am concerned with it now) only a few months. The decision that it should be consummated in marriage as quickly as possible was deliberate, and inspired by the same attitude of mind which made me incapable of any other romantic relationship.

What was that attitude of mind?

As a young man, I was never very far from the company of friends and companions, male friends and companions, who were laboriously and consistently trying to win the favour of one young woman or the other. This was true of my small provincial town, in the university town, and, of course, in the two English cities. This was true of my Indian friends, and of my British, African, French and Scandinavian friends. "What an extraordinary observation!" you might be tempted to remark, but I haven't finished yet. What depressed me about the efforts of these friends was that in almost all cases, without exception, these labours were directed only at one goal — to take the woman to bed as quickly and as cleverly as possible. 'Cleverly' could be taken to mean 'with as little expense as possible.' I must admit, even at the risk of sounding prudish and pompous, that the grossness of this approach revolted me, but this did not seem to occur at all to the friends in question. I wanted to tell myself that this was not always true, that there were some honest and romantic young men too, that it was just my misfortune that all my male friends happened to be like this. But years passed, I moved from

place to place, from one country to another, one city to another, but nowhere did I come across an exception. Some of the friends did eventually get married to one of the young women they had been bedding, but not before they had provided their own share of unmistakable grist to my hypothetical mill.

My hypothesis then was not only that the male of the species is biologically incapable of love, but that he uses the pretence of love to get what he wants — the woman in his bed. Even if he did marry the woman later, it did not prove my hypothesis wrong. But from this arose the inevitable conclusion that man was

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basically dishonest and a cheat. I am aware that many a thinker and a philosopher have attempted to put a veneer of biological necessity, genetic determinism, the inevitability of a male-female divide, etc. on this basic dishonesty, this elemental fraud, and I could never, never accept it. I am also aware of the pleas for mitigation, explicit or implicit, which are often raised, especially in defence of many male artists, writers, philosophers, scientists etc., who went on to achieve great distinction in later life, which seems to imply that their achievements somehow not only make them deserving of a pardon for their past sexual misdemeanours but also provide a licence for the present and the future. And, I regret to say, among the pleasers, there are the very victims of such 'misdemeanours' — the women.

I have used the phrase 'sexual misdemeanours' on purpose, and with a bit of irony. For it is with the use of this phrase that the defenders of the great try to neutralise the moral implications of what I have called the elemental fraud. A 'misdemeanour', as the dictionary defines it, is 'a minor wrongdoing', a playful diversion. That it certainly may be for the man, but what about the woman? Birth control methods may have reduced the chances of the attendant misery and degradation that women often had to face in such a situation in the past, but that does not take away from the basic dishonesty of the man's act, and does not save him from the accompanying moral degradation.

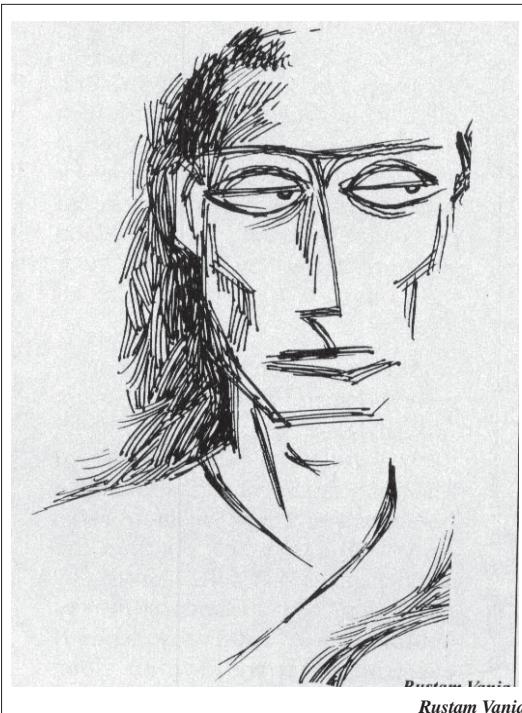
If the picture I have been painting of men seems to be done in unduly dark colours, I must urge you to think of me not as I am now but as I was then — an idealistic and impressionable young, but by no means callow, man, looking for a framework of beliefs and practices to sustain myself with. In later years, I was to learn a lot more about the complexities that characterise men's characters and was also at times bemused by the picture I had drawn of myself as a lamb condemned to live in the company of wolves. Getting married and becoming a family man inevitably uncovered to me, layer by layer, the little meannesses and dishonesties that I was capable of, the sheer unreasonableness that could often take hold of me and drown that innate sense of moral and intellectual rectitude that in my youthful conceit I believed I possessed. I have tried to outgrow all of this; I have even tried to learn to prize the virtue of tolerance above all others and have to no mean extent been helped in this by my study of literature. Even more than the study of literature, I have been helped by my study of the

characters of the men themselves, for not a few of the 'lecherous' friends of my youth turned out in later life to be men of great principles and probity. It would be very hard to find any blemish in their characters today, and a tolerant observer could well claim that they had 'redeemed' themselves several times over.

Their redemption is however something that, having ceased to be only a moral creature, I am no longer primarily interested in. Interestingly enough, I have met many of these men in later lives and found that neither were they. In fact, we have met after many, many years, we have sat together for hours, we have talked about this and that and the other thing from the days of our youth, and we have been very cheerful and very happy till I brought up, or hinted at, 'the episode' from the friend's life to which, in his youthful bravado, he had made me privy to then. Suddenly, a curtain of silence falls across us. One has the feeling that one has touched a raw wound. "Does he regret what he did?" I have found myself wondering.

Driven by curiosity, I have sometimes pressed on, but I have never been able to detect a trace of regret. I must of course make it clear that, talking as I now was to very mature and very experienced persons, perhaps holding very senior and highly responsible positions, or a distinguished intellectual, usually a man of achievement but sometimes also one whom life raised to great heights only to cast down again, nothing was stated explicitly, and what I garnered was from the few charily given out signals that it was left to me to interpret. And the way I interpreted them allowed no scope for regret. Instead, the impression I gathered was

that of a moment of time frozen in memory, completely amoral in its implications, a moment of time carefully preserved in the backyard of memory to which stolen visits are paid every now and then. Not only are there no regrets, but the moments are cherished as memories which provide richness to an otherwise flat existence, dimensions that ensure you company when alone. It almost seemed to me that this man would be poorer but for the experience — a poorer husband, a poorer father, a poorer individual.



None of this has however helped me to overcome my revulsion at the basic dishonesty, which was the starting point of it all. To be sure, all of these experiences may be valuable material for a novelist, a poet, or a painter as illustrations of the great variety of human character. In fact, the longer he can sustain the fraud, the richer the hinterland of his artistic creation. In all probability, his early surrender to his low nature may even help a man develop a kindlier

disposition towards the world in his later life as a recompense. But for me the problem remained, and remains: how do you come to terms with the basic dishonesty which in the first place gave rise to the situation?

Probably it is this question that has accounted for my inability to develop a romantic relationship with a woman. In fact, it has happened that I was introduced to a girl, began to get friendly with her, and then the question — 'Am I committing the same fraud?'

would start ringing in my ears, and not a word of 'love' would escape my lips. My wife, who has always complained that I never expressed my 'love' to her before our marriage in words, will now probably understand why. And, yet, ours was not an 'arranged' marriage.

Over the years, I have changed my hypothesis in one respect. When, in case after case, I found the same 'dishonesty' and 'fraud' being repeated, I began to wonder if I wasn't up against a 'law of nature'. Were those who talked about biological necessity and the male-female divide right, after all? Was the male guilty of dishonesty and fraud, or was he just being true to his nature, while men like me were being untrue to it? I was also bothered by the fact that women, who bore the brunt of it all, whose sufferings and misery and humiliation on account of this elemental fraud had filled pages and pages of world literature, did not seem to be very vociferous in their condemnation of men, but somehow looked upon the whole thing with a puzzlingly tolerant eye. Surely, there was something exaggerated about my moral stance. What was it?

The more I reflected on the question, the more I began to feel that the male was really helpless in the

whole affair and, his biological urge being what it is, it was really no small mercy that he made a pretence of love at all before unleashing his real nature. Perhaps there was a time in the evolution of man, as there is now in the evolution of other animals, when he did not even make this pretence. Wasn't culture all about this pretence? Isn't the elaborate paraphernalia of gifts of fine clothes, jewellery, houses, carriages, slaves and what not that men have bestowed on their current fancies a part of this pretence? Then why blame men alone? Can the woman be unaware that it is a pretence — after so many centuries of history? Were the women who accepted these gifts with alacrity, and even competed with other women in accepting them from the same man, unaware of the fraud being played? Aren't the women who accepted little trinkets from their 'lovers' yesterday, who accept them today, and who will accept them tomorrow, knowing full well the intentions behind them and still going ga-ga over them, also to blame? And I'm not excepting the custom, in 'civilised' societies, of girls being disallowed to accept gifts from non-serious lovers, for is the serious lover any different so far as the 'fraud' is concerned?

The only reassuring answer to this question can be that I have been ignoring the biology of women, that they too have instincts, they too want sex, and that therefore there is indeed no dishonesty in the male's approach: he knows that she knows, and she knows that he knows that she knows. It's therefore all a game, in which all partners are willing partners, or willing but pretending to be unwilling, and it's just too bad that some people get hurt in this game, even if it is always people from the same side.

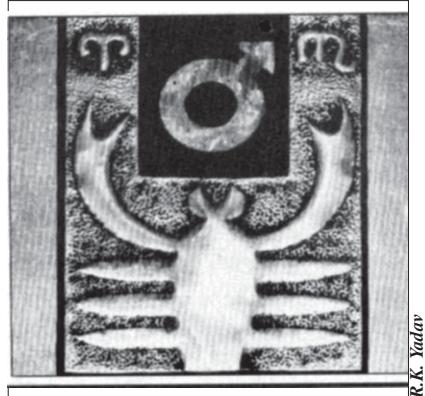
I have no difficulty in accepting this solution and in absolving men of

### *Was the male guilty of dishonesty and fraud, or was he just being true to his nature, while men like me were being untrue to it?*

all guilt. But then the 'horrifying' conclusion follows — which is what we wanted to wish away in the first place — that there is indeed no such thing as love, indeed that love is nothing but a pretence. It is only a veneer that 'cultured' men wear as pants and 'cultured' women as skirts or sarees as the case may be. Under the pants and the sarees, we're all naked.

Hardened men and women, hardened in the battles of sex, may not find anything very disturbing about that conclusion — and may indeed find this a fitting occasion to wear the I-told-you-so smirk on their faces again. But can we all face the consequences that follow from this conclusion? Don't these consequences amount to a total reversal of everything that we have all along taken culture to mean?

Take, for instance, the institution of marriage. Unlike in the west, our institution of marriage is not based on the sanctity of love — perhaps a recognition that there indeed may be no such thing prior to marriage. Marriage imposes duties, both on the



husband and the wife, but to love each other could not be one of them, or the point of the joke would be lost. And of course marriage legalises sex. Now there can be no dishonesty, no fraud, for there is a straight claim to sex: the notion of rape in marriage is still confined to only very few societies.

Your will does not enter into it any more. You are sold — you, who thought that you would not give sex in return for gifts of clothes and jewellery when unmarried, must now give it for security, and, in addition, willingly work as a slave. You, who would not sleep with different men at different times for different pretences of love and gifts, must now sleep with the same man throughout your life, as and when he wishes it, without any pretences, and without any gifts. Where is the difference, unless it is for the worse?

In these days of feminist writing, statements like 'Every married woman is a bit of a prostitute,' 'Marriage is legalised prostitution,' etc. are quite commonplace. Yet the pretence continues that somehow if men behaved better, if they showed greater regard for women's feelings, if they gave her equal rights, things would change, women would cease to be prostitutes and the institution of marriage would be saved.

Little do we realise what it will take to give marriage total validity, instead of merely giving it another lease of life, to save every woman from being a bit of a prostitute, and to stop marriage from being legalised prostitution. It would mean no more and no less than giving women biological equality with men, which, despite the advanced state of our scientific and technological knowledge, is still an impossibility. The most we can do today is to give to the woman the choice to conceive or not to conceive, but we cannot make the

man share the burden of conception equally with her. Nor, given a strong will to achieve sexual equality, is this necessary in the strictest sense.

We must remember that biological difference in itself is not to blame for the denial of equality to women: it is the cultural consequences arising from it which are to blame. But these cultural consequences, no matter how long they have been entrenched in our social consciousness, are not necessary concomitants of biology. Some societies, as we are aware, have already taken steps to delink the two, and the results have startled and shocked the male-dominated social consciousness. An almost universal reaction has set in for the male-dominated societies to withdraw into their old shells — mainly taking the route of religion for its age-old appeal to the womenfolk. Let me try to sketch below, in the barest outline, what the social scene would be like were this delinking of biology and culture to be taken, as it should be taken, to its logical conclusion.

First and foremost, this would involve freeing women from the cultural burden of conception, which means bringing about a society in which it would be considered an entirely accidental fact that it is the woman who gives birth. In other words, the social and familial roles of man and woman would be defined independently of this fact. To bring this about, a few steps would be necessary. First, and this has already come about to some extent in western societies, the choice to conceive or not, or when to conceive if at all, must be entirely in the hands of the conceiver, i.e. the mother. This must become as unarguable a convention as till recently was the woman-must-rule-in-the-kitchen convention. The non-conceiver must begin to accept it as quite natural that, not being called upon to suffer the

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consequences of conception, his or her will in the matter is of no concern whatsoever. The non-conceiver here includes not only the husband but all the other members, male or female, in patriarchal families who look upon the bride's role as merely that of the carrier of the patriarchal line.

Secondly, social responsibilities, i.e., jobs would be distributed without taking into account gender, proven suitability to the job being the only consideration in each individual case.

To undo the malignant results of centuries of discrimination in this area, affirmative action would be necessary at least for a century, in some countries perhaps even more. This would also include, *inter alia*, violating the principle of equal-pay-for-equal-work in favour of women, reserving more than 50% jobs for women, and making a constitutional provision for more than 50% reservation for women in legislative bodies.

Thirdly, the laws would have to be

completely rewritten to make men and women perfectly equal, with compensatory provision for past inequality.

Fourthly, after birth, the child would be the equal responsibility of both the father and the mother, with compensatory exemptions to the mother for bearing the burden of conception. All practices at home and at the workplace would have to be redefined and redrawn to make this possible.

Fifthly, any criminal conduct which is traceable to sex-difference, e.g., teasing, molestation, rape, etc. would have to be defined as being violative of a fundamental right of people viz. gender equality, and therefore would be on a par with similar other crimes involving the basic fundamental rights, like the right to life. At a different level, it would also mean total eradication of those differences, in appearance, clothing, behaviour norms, speech etc. which give rise to cultural stereotyping of men and women and aid and abet sexual discrimination. In other words, we would have, for all practical purposes, a unisex society.

I have only given a sketch of the kind of things that need to be done if culture is to be delinked from biology. A more comprehensive and graphic description could be left to a team of researchers. It will, however, not have gone unnoticed that some of these trends are already in evidence in certain societies. But even in the most liberated societies, which are fortunate enough in not being burdened by centuries of tradition of discrimination based on sex, the resistance is strong, and a substantial part of the resistance comes from women themselves.

The relevance of this sketch of a totally gender-independent society to the present argument is this: Only in

such a society would the pretence of 'love', when all that is meant is sex, cease to be necessary, and only in such a society would all women cease to be bits of prostitutes. Marriage would take on a very different character, and would cease to be seen as legalised prostitution. Prostitution itself would not disappear, but that is not my concern in this essay, which objects to the pretence of love in sex and can therefore have no objection to prostitution, which is a straight business deal. However, insofar as prostitution is a direct result of the centuries old exploitation of women by men, its incidence is bound to come down in a gender-neutral culture.

What would happen to 'love' in this scenario? As I state in my modified hypothesis, as of now we don't know if any such thing exists: what exists is the disgusting pretence called love. Over the centuries, a male-dominated society has set up 'love' as an ideal to be followed, mostly by women, has apotheosised and etherealised it, sung songs in its praise, used all the guiles and charms of a Casanova to bewitch women into believing that their salvation lies only in loving a man, has used the temptations of wealth and

power which it has concentrated in the hands of men — in short has spared no deception in its relentless pursuit of a single goal, which is to convince women that they cannot exist without love, so that he can get what he wants — sex. If women have fallen for this guile, it is no great wonder, for one of the most beguiling tricks of the man has been to lead the woman to believe that it is the woman who has the guile and the man is but a poor victim to it. And the women have lapped it up.

So long as we are in the grips of this labyrinthine intrigue, the true nature of love, if it exists at all, cannot but evade us. It will be a long struggle before the last webs of this intrigue can be fully unravelled, before the last vestige of man's vested interest can be thoroughly exposed. Till then, no society, however civilised it may like to call itself, can make any claims to have experienced true love. What it has experienced is a monumental fraud of its own making, but of such vintage that it has always looked like the real stuff.

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