

Session 1 summary: Resisting Coloniality, Transnational Articulations

Lissell Quiroz (CY Cergy Paris University)

Taking Peru as a case study, Lissell Quiroz's talk "Decolonising medical knowledge: the case of the history of obstetrics in Peru (19th – 20th century)" deconstructed the significant change of paradigm regarding obstetric practices between 1820 and 1992.

In 1820 Peru, home births were the norm, and the birthing process was typically handled by family members who had labour experience of their own, or by traditional birth attendants who provided birthing assistance in the community. In fact, the latter tended to people's various medical needs, including midwifery and pharmacopoeia, regardless of social class. However, 1992 marks a key moment as medicalised childbirth exceeded the 50 percent threshold for the first time in Peruvian history. The Eurocentric model overtaking the traditional way of childbirth is significant in that it confirms the deeper transformations of the country's social norms regarding birth.

During the Enlightenment period, the sphere of childbirth appeared as a space of immense political power, and the Peruvian ruling class educated with enlightenment ideals, harshly criticised the medical practices of traditional healers and challenged their existence. Quiroz noted that medical doctors tried to discredit traditional birth attendants by making false accusations in order to gain control over the birthing field, as seen in the case of Dorotea Salguero (1827-1830). For instance, they accused them of neglecting their patients, performing abortions, and killing newborns. In addition, Quiroz contends that traditional birth attendants were originally preferred to "medical doctors" for their closeness to childbearing mothers in terms of both social relationship and gender. Indeed, childbirth occurred within the feminine sphere in which the parturient had much control over the proceeding of the labour, therefore the presence of men doctors during their labour was a source of discomfort.

Quiroz illustrates the case of Benoit Pauline Fessel, a trained French midwife graduate of the Port Royal Maternity Hospital in Paris, to demonstrate how this trained midwife serviced the purpose of discrediting traditional midwives. The Peruvian authorities, with the help of Fessel as the first director of the maternity of Lima, established the hospital as a teaching and learning space for medical students and doctors. In fact, the Maternity Hospital was based on a French system in which birth giving turned from being a family or community matter where parturients delivered at home, to delivering in open rooms next to other women in labour, thereby accommodating the learning needs of students than those of women in childbirth. Additionally, the hospital was also the setting for new experimental procedures such as the use of forceps or the caesarean section, lethal at that time. These experimental practices were especially conducted on racialised native women as they represented the greater number of patients in Lima's Maternity Hospital.

Another significant highlight of Quiroz's talk was women's resistance to the different forms of violence and coloniality over their bodies, explaining why it took nearly two centuries for western obstetric medical system to predominate. The talk attempted to illustrate how the history of Obstetrics in Peru is synonymous with dispossession of women's knowledge, bodies, and sexuality.

Delwar Hussain (University of Edinburgh)

Delwar Hussain's insightful presentation discussed, two queer activists Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy's murders in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2016. It highlighted the enduring impact of British colonial-era laws, morals, and values on postcolonial states and societies and how the latter embrace those customs as their own. It also articulated the plight of contemporary LGBTQ+ right activists in Bangladesh and how they end up in the crosshairs of state, military, judiciary, and non-state actors like religious groups. Without denigrating the LGBTQ+ movement, Hussein makes the case of how in the name of liberation and freedom from discrimination and oppression, the international LGBTQ+ community overlooks existing local forms of same sex desires.

Xulhaz Mannan, openly gay himself, actively worked to give the LGBTQ+ community the freedom to live their sexuality openly, which was usually silenced and confined to the digital world or private sphere. In 2014, Mannan published *Roopban*, the only gay magazine in Bangladesh, which contained an article calling for the abrogation of section 377 of the Bangladeshi Penal Code, a carryover from the British Empire. The law stipulates that "voluntary carnal intercourse against 'the order of nature with any man, woman or animal' is punishable with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment which may extend to ten years and fines". Following the release of *Roopban*, the then Bangladeshi Prime minister qualified it as pornography, and the home minister declared that writing in favour of same sex relations was illegal. The specific law the home minister was referring to was the Penal Code 377, the same law Mannan tried to repeal. As such, Section 377 is a British colonial-era law enacted in 1860. Hussein pointed out that South Asian societies have always had plural configurations of gender and sexuality. Hijras for instance, people of non-binary gender expression, are legally protected by Bangladeshi Law. Hence, Hussein argues that the anti LGBTQ+ legacy in Bangladesh and in former British colonies in Asia is the end result of the British colonial-era laws.

In addition to the publication of *Roopban*, Mannan organised in 2014 the first Rainbow Rally in Bangladesh. Mannan was cautious not to call it Pride Rally because he wished it to be an indigenous movement. Nevertheless, he chose Rainbow, referencing the rainbow flag to connect with the broader LGBTQ+ movement. The event was organised during the celebration of Bangladeshi New Year on 14th April. The numerous processions and colourful parades of the Bangladeshi New Year created the perfect camouflage for the Rainbow Rally which went unnoticed. However, after high pressure from the police who detained four activists, organisers of the 2016 Rainbow Rally had to cancel the parade.

The murderers of Mannan and Rabbi Tonoy were fueled by anti-imperialist discourse, i.e. the murderers believed that homosexuality is tantamount to imperialism and western colonialism. Ironically, the *Roopban* article calling for the abrogation of Section 377 criticised United States' hypocrisy and war crimes. The two activists' tragic death did not spark a revolution, but it brought Bangladeshi LGBTQ+ issues to the global scene. Sadly, the international community interpretation of the events was as shallow as 'Muslim = anti-queer'. It is in this regard that Hussain offers a deeper examination of Mannan's activism for LGBT rights. He asserts that Mannan's determination to defy the security risks involved in organising the rally was not unanimously supported within his circle, or within the larger Bangladeshi LGBTQ+ community. Indeed, a certain number of people from the community wished to maintain the status quo and keep living their sexuality in private.

Morsi Abdelkrim