

What's so 'queer' about coming out? Silent queers and theorizing kinship agonistically in Mumbai

Sexualities

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Abstract

What kinds of creative potential exist in silence – in not coming out? This ethnographic study takes the strategic silences that queer persons in Mumbai deploy regarding 'coming out' as productive for theorizing the connections between kinship and queerness. While some strands of queer critique conceptualize the relationship between kinship and queerness antagonistically, the author deploys the concept of agonistic intimacy outlined in Singh's *Poverty and the Quest for Life* (2015) to consider how queers might inhabit heterosexual kinship networks through the interplay of contestation and submission. Silence, then, need not signal the image of the transnational queer in need of saving, but a mode of negotiating desires for respectability and queerness.

Keywords

Coming out, kinship, queer theory, sexuality, South Asia

Introduction

In December 2013, the Indian Supreme Court ruled to reinstate an 1860 ban on non-penovaginal sexual intercourse between consenting adults, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC 377). In their ruling, the justices decried the invisibility of LGBTQ+ populations in India, citing that IPC 377 did not invalidate fundamental constitutional rights because 'a miniscule fraction of the country's population constitute lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgenders' (*Koushal v. Naz*, 2013: 83). 'Miniscule' suggests that, in the purview of the justices, sexual minorities were not sufficiently out of the closet to merit special protections or the removal of an archaic law. In short, if LGBTQ+ are not visible, then they do not exist.

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If the Court's ruling was a call for LGBTQ+ visibility, then on 15 December 2013, they got their response. The Global Day of Rage marked a coordinated series of demonstrations to protest against the ruling, with people taking to the streets to produce themselves as visible, as here, and certainly as queer. As Mumbai-based gay activist Harish Iyer explained, 'In order for this invisible community to become invincible, we have to show numbers and politicize ourselves' (*Global Post*, 2014). But politicization comes with a price. In the dozens of interviews I conducted while researching queer social movements in India, interlocutors repeated phrases such as '*main khaandaan ko badnaam nahin karna chahta hoon*' ('I don't want to ruin the name of my family') in response to questions about being out. Invoking the concept of *khaandaan* (family), many articulate the twin deaths of reputation and family that accompany visibility, being out. Coming out marks not merely the speech act of pronouncement, but is also perceived as an act of severance, of cutting oneself off from obligations to family. Ram, an activist working with various organizations for LGBTQ+ inclusion in India for decades recalled that, 'When I came out to my mother, she called me *vansh mrityu*, the death of the clan.'

At a moment when queers are attempting to be included on the registers of legal and political recognition, family continues to be an ambivalent and often neglected place both for activist intervention and for academic theorizing.¹ Calls for an invisible, miniscule minority to become politicized are not simply invitations to be visible, but perhaps also indictments – critiques – of queer silence, especially within domestic spaces. Queers are compelled to be talking subjects, those who are 'out and proud'. Coming out has historically been valorized as a site for contestation, for gaining political power, and for attaining self-respect (Weston, 1991: 47). The emphasis on visibility via verbal disclosure of one's sexuality has been central to queer activist struggles for rights and recognition. Thus, a queerness that both operationalizes and persists through silence might be seen as constricting, oppressive, and backwards. But, what kinds of creative potential might exist in silence – in not coming out through the speech act of a verbalized disclosure?²

In this article, drawing on ethnographic accounts with queer young people in Mumbai, I argue that, while queer critique has been immensely useful for capturing the problems associated with certain kinds of normativity produced through kinship, we might do better to think of the relationship between queerness and kinship agonistically instead of antagonistically. I consider acts of concealment – silence, the impossibility of speech, and even the failures surrounding coming out and being 'heard' by family – as generative for thinking about the queer potentialities and contradictions of normative, natal kinship arrangements. This is not an attempt to romanticize silence or advance it as a 'non-Western' alternative to coming out. Rather, I am interested in thinking through the manifold desires that are revealed by not verbally disclosing one's sexuality to family. Instead of looking at the queer as the anathema of kinship (antagonism), we might consider family (and ultimately kinship) to be relations of 'agonistic intimacy', where violence and care intermingle (Singh, 2011). Turning to Singh's concept of agonistic intimacy, I argue that the daily negotiations that queers make to navigate their identities reveal the multiple

and contradictory desires and institutions that queers inhabit. By focusing on queer attachments to natal kinship, I suggest that inhabiting contradictions between queer and normative – failing to ever be fully one or the other – is perhaps the substance central to queer experience. I explore these issues with special reference to India.

The study

This article is based on two years of fieldwork conducted over three periods in India between June 2013 and March 2017. I initially started ethnographic research with LGBTQ+ activists based in Mumbai in the first phase of my research from June to August 2013. In the second phase (summer 2014) and third phase (September 2015 to March 2017) I turned to exploring how LGBTQ+ persons are becoming a recognized minority in India through legal debates and various projects to visibilize and normalize queer ‘sub-culture’. I used snowball sampling to locate interlocutors through connections to LGBTQ+ activist and social networks in Mumbai. In order to protect the privacy of research participants, I have used pseudonyms and changed identifying characteristics. Data presented in this article were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. I conducted participant observations at a local NGO working on LGBTQ+ issues as well as attending meetings, protests, and other social events. Participants in this study are from a range of socioeconomic, class, caste, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Although the study takes place in Mumbai, participants are from all over India, some having shifted to Mumbai for employment and others being born and brought up there. Although I have worked with a range of LGBTQ+ persons in Mumbai over the years, I focus this article mostly on young people (18–34) because they are encountering a moment in global LGBTQ+ politics and Indian LGBTQ+ organizing that emphasizes coming out as critical to the sustainability of queer politics in India. The interviews featured in this article come from youth participants aged 18–34 who identified as LGBTQ+. I am particularly interested in this generation because of a larger ongoing research project exploring the changing terrain of queer subculture in Mumbai and the role that young people play in making it visible.

Querying queer kinship: From antagonism to agonistic intimacy

Much of the project of queer critique has been to denaturalize normality, with special attention to gender and sexuality. In its more inchoate formations, queer theory captured ‘gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire’ (Jagose, 1996: 3). Kinship has also been dramatized and disrupted by queer theory and queer anthropology. Recent critiques of queer liberalism (Eng, 2010; Puar, 2006, 2007, 2013; Ward, 2008) have responded to LGBTQ+ mobilizations around a range of institutions: marriage, military service, state recognition, and so on.

Thus, the work to denaturalize ideas of normal has intersected with a need to challenge institutions – as well as the subsequent desire for those institutions – that are considered socially respectable, normal and legitimate. Jane Ward (2008: 150) has cautioned against the ‘narrowing gap between LGBT approaches to difference and those emerging from inside corporations and other mainstream institutions’ such as marriage. Similarly, the recapitulation of the ‘Oedipal family’ in Eng’s (2010) terms signals a growing compulsion for the queer subject to speak the language of normalcy to become legally recognizable.

More recent turns in queer theory towards negativity and anti-normativity, while crucial sites for critique of various hegemonies, have constructed queerness and kinship in oppositional relations of antagonism. From Bersani’s (1987) theories of queerness as self-shattering to more recent work on the modes through which sexuality undoes the self and the social (Berlant and Edelman, 2013), family, relationality and kinship itself mark a constraint for queerness, an ‘outside’ and ‘other side’ of ‘all political sides’ (Edelman, 2004: 7). Building on this, Edelman further maintains that we must also disrupt the socializing impulses of political work through resisting ‘reproductive futurism’ – the construction of a political future inherently built on the heterosexual reproduction of future generations. Instead, he imagines a theory of negativity that compels queers to embrace their structural negativity, that which challenges both the literal reproduction of sociality as well as the political desire for a better future.

Although anti-sociality and anti-normativity are by no means representative of all queer critique, they are perhaps two strands of growing thought about queer kinship both within the US academy and India. In the developing literature on India, scholars have drawn from queer critiques of liberalism (Shah, 2015; Sircar and Jain, 2012, 2013) and heteronormativity (Menon, 2007; Puar, 2013) to make similar claims about the antagonisms between queerness and kinship. Both Menon (2007) and Sircar and Jain (2012) highlight not just the normalizing impulses of heterosexual kinship but also the modes through which heteronormativity often works against the interests of queers, particularly through reifying institutions like the family, law and state. Yet, as Boyce and Khanna (2011) suggest, homosocial and homoerotic worlds emerge and thrive even within normative spaces. Their insight is crucial because it gestures to the productive and important intersections between queerness and normativity, particularly that queer life worlds can and do endure even in the most normative of spaces. While Boyce and Khanna explore the spatial intersections of heteronormativity and homosexuality via cruising and various other sex publics in India, how might we see queerness and normativity as inhabiting the same spaces, the same institution, and the same arcs of desire?

Agonistic intimacy is perhaps one such way of thinking about the coexistence of contradiction as part of daily life. Singh (2011, 2015) describes agonistic intimacy as ‘a mode of intimacy conceived not in terms of public–private quandaries’, but ‘as a form of moral relatedness between potentially hostile neighbors’ (Singh, 2011: 432). Through the image of the neighbor, he explores how differing castes and religious groups in India may inhabit the world together, despite the potential

for violence. For these differing castes, Singh highlights a shared sense of recognition of the other as adversary rather than enemy. His concept draws on theories of agonistics, a mode of political thought that considers conflict not as something to shy away from in democratic life, but as central to the political (Honig, 1993; Mouffe, 1999, 2013).

By turning to the question of neighborly politics as a site of contestation, agonistic intimacy in Singh's work offers a complicated picture of how intimate relations between hostile neighbors can manifest deep forms of play, erotic transgressions, bawdy insults, and even violence. What is crucial in Singh's framing of agonistic intimacy is the potential for relations to slip into hostility between neighboring groups; that play and even care can suddenly delve into the space of violence. Singh's work highlights the volatile nature of human intimacy, that our neighbor could be both our friend and enemy. Extending agonistic intimacy beyond neighbors of differing caste and or religious backgrounds, I want to suggest its usefulness for describing the intersections between queers and their natal kinship networks. Agonistic intimacy is itself a queer concept in its description of the unpredictable and ambivalent nature of intimacy. As I will argue in the rest of this article, queers experience their kinship networks in similarly contradictory ways. I draw on the distinction between agonistic intimacy and antagonism to argue that the relationship of queerness to normative institutions, like family, might be one animated by the potential for both violence and care. Thought this way, queerness need not be a question of antagonizing, shattering or even outing, but challenging and contesting the normativity of kinship, even while being sublimated by its effects.

In the contexts of my ethnographic observations from fieldwork, some LGBTQ+ young people in Mumbai are not antagonizing kinship, but playing within and through kinship. From the strategic usages of silence – the non disclosure of sexual identity – to playful manipulations of speech that never fully disclose, queers deploy tactics that may subvert visibility to family as well as challenge the norms that enclose them. What is most useful here about agonistic intimacy as a frame is that it emphasizes the potential hostilities that undergird seemingly stable relations (Singh, 2011: 432). Silence is not the complete objectification of queers to power, but is indicative of multiple, conflicting desires for individuality and sociality, sex and kinship, respectability and queerness. Instead, it is perhaps making a home out of contradiction.

Impossible speech

In January 2016, a queer youth collective staged a flashmob outside a train station in the suburbs of Mumbai. With costumes and rainbow attire, the choreographed performance to Bollywood songs rehearsed the usual sappy sweet love tunes and stylized dance moves of mainstream Hindi cinema, but with a queer twist. As a crowd of bystanders gathered to observe the spectacle, a drag queen emerged from the center of the dancers waving a rainbow flag, chanting 'I am gay, that's okay' and 'Freedom from 377', among other slogans in English, Hindi, and Marathi.

When the crowd dispersed, I turned to a group of men standing nearby and asked them their thoughts on the performance. '*Achcha laga*', I liked it, one of them said. When I asked their thoughts on the message, the response was less emphatic. I was met with silence. As I tried to prompt more conversation, it became more apparent that, although they enjoyed the skit, the message on what Section 377 or 'homosexuality' were may not have been clear. Even when I translated gay into its Sanskritized equivalent *samlaingikik* (desiring same-ness), the men looked at me somewhat puzzled. As I belabored over translating men desiring other men and women desiring other women, I was not met with hostility but confusion.

The dearth of non-English, regional terms to describe counter heteronormative desire marks an important constraint for those seeking to come out and name their sexuality both in India and beyond. As scholars working across South Asia have demonstrated, naming counterheteronormative sexuality and gender practices often run up against the shortage of non-English terms to describe difference (Cohen, 2005; Dave, 2011, 2012; Shah, 1993; Vanita, 2001). This does not deny the frequency of nonheteronormative sex nor attest to its absence. Rather, it suggests the growing schism between queerness as a fixed identity and as indexical of counterheteronormative practices and desires. Silence here then is not only about concealment, strategy, or a refusal to come out, but also the difficulty of translating and articulating desire.

In 2013, I met an activist named Vikas who had been supporting an LGBTQ youth initiative in Mumbai. During one of our conversations, Vikas shared the experiences of a mutual friend who had tried to start the process of coming out:

Arjun, decided the safest person to come out to would be his grandmother. Though he was nervous, he finally told her 'granny I'm gay'. And she said 'what is that?' He said you know it's when a man likes another man. She paused and said 'come on, when I was younger there were tons of boys in my village who did that, but you have to get married.'

This moment of generational impasse signals not only the fragmentary nature of recognition, but also the impossibility of certain kinds of interpellation at particular moments (Gopinath, 2005). For Arjun, coming out was not about perfecting a translation of being gay that could be relevant to a non-English speaking grandmother. Coming out was actually about 'outing heteronormativity' (Menon, 2007) as the frame that structures both the availability of language as well as the capacity of language to have concrete social meaning. Arjun's grandmother's simultaneous understanding of gay as a sexual attraction to men and dismissal of homosexuality as a 'lifestyle' – as opting out of the obligations to heterosexual reproduction – co-opted the speech act of coming out to reassert the importance of social norms ('you still have to get married'). The insistence on the importance of marriage is neither a rejection of Arjun's attraction to men nor an example of disgust towards homosexuality. Instead, it is a negotiation between recognizing the possibility of

erotic love between members of the same sex and an understanding of a person as legitimated through the obligation to marry. As Vikas went on to say:

I remember my sister in law asked me once, what is this? Do men like men and women like women? How can that happen? She was not disapproving. It was not disgust. I have seen in my work in India that I am faced with a lot of ignorance but very honestly I haven't seen so much of homophobia.

While it could be read pejoratively, Vikas's usage of the term 'ignorant' is resonant of Sedgwick's (1990) idea that knowledge, secret or open, is also intricately tied to ignorance. And power is about the interplay between both knowledge and ignorance. Vikas's claim about the ubiquity of ignorance suggests that being queer negotiates a regime of truth that takes heterosexuality (and heteronormativity) as the starting point of knowledge, of the self, of legitimacy. Within this truth regime, a particular fidelity to kinship, to the obligations of living a life with and for others, is the starting point for thinking about navigating sexuality and gender differences that run against the grain of heterosexual kinship. Encountering ignorance is then not a condition of being in the dark or opacity per se. Instead it signals the encountering of a dominant knowledge paradigm that has established divergences as deviant and illegitimate.

Therefore, it is crucial, as Sedgwick (1990: 8) reminds us, to not demonize ignorance but consider ways in which knowledge can be pluralized and specified. For interlocutors, such as Vikas, this practice of rendering knowledge plural and specific is an invitation to create and invent new modes of expression, new words, new ways of inhabiting the margins of social sanction. Inventiveness offers the grounds for articulation of queer voice and critique through a reworking or reorientation to what social norms hold up as objective truths. Inventive practices can extend beyond the fraught categories of resistance and domination, enabling individuals to construct forms of self-making that inhabit the spaces between both categories (Allen, 2011; Dave, 2012).

For example, instead of directly coming out, some queers direct their sexual dissidence towards marriage. From stating that they want to focus on their careers to outright refusing to marry, renouncing marriage has become a convenient and strategic way for queers in India to unsettle the heterosexual expectations of family members as well as to work around gaps in language. Kirti, a 22-year-old lesbian that I met through a support group for LBT persons, expressed her sexuality to family not by naming it but by disavowing the idea of marriage. Although she has grown up in a relatively traditional Bengali household, with two parents who emphasized the importance of marriage, she started to negotiate her sexuality within her home by stating her refusal to marry. Given the importance of marriage as a life cycle rite and something that women are expected and conditioned to want, to desire a life beyond marriage is to contest numerous social norms. Kirti's actions signal modes through which young people may make space for their identity, not by rejecting or dismissing their parents entirely, but by negotiating the

interconnectedness of parental expectations and individual desires. Kirti's mode of disclosure, without actually disclosing, does different work from just coming out. By starting with the question of marriage, and displacing lesbianism as that which she needed to identify, she confronted the heteronormativity that makes lesbianism 'impossible' (Gopinath, 2005) and 'incommensurable' (Dave, 2012) within South Asian domestic spaces. Such a negotiation indicates a mode of self-making that does not need to replicate the liberal and individualized queer subject identified in queer critiques of coming out (e.g. Decena, 2008). Instead, this method of working around coming out recognizes the closet as a collaborative and collective concept.

Silence as care

Kalpana and I met during a summer internship with an LGBTQ+ NGO in Mumbai. While she and I shared a desk for the summer, I watched her work in numerous roles for the NGO. Her most interesting of these roles was as a crisis counselor. When people were having family issues, facing harassment, or just generally troubled, they came to Kalpana for help. On one particular day, a woman came into the office and plopped herself down in a swivel chair inside the office conference room. Kalpana rose up from her chair to greet the young woman. As I later found out, this woman had run away from her home in a nearby town to Mumbai. She had left her husband and abandoned her married life to be with another woman. Her parents entered the conference room not long after the woman arrived. Dressed in light cotton sari and dhoti, they sat in the office swivel chairs at the opposite end of the table. Through the large glass window of the room I watched Kalpana begin to speak as the parents sat at the opposite end of the table, staring into half-empty cups of water. The hushed silence of the entire office reverberated the intense, thick, and immanent negotiations happening in that conference room: of competing claims to legitimate desires – parents wishing their daughter could have a life of feminine and social respectability through marriage and a queer daughter desiring a queer future, a future marked by the right to choice.

'Why the fuck would you get married then? If you like women, then you like women. Tell your parents, instead of troubling their lives and now mine with this dramatic runaway nonsense.' A few hours after the ordeal and once the girl and her parents had left the office, Kalpana's beleaguered tone evinced her frustration with the entire situation. Apparently the girl who had run away from her home had tried to make an arrangement with her husband-to-be prior to the marriage, an arrangement that would allow her the opportunity to continue to see her girlfriend. However, upon the finalization of the marriage, the groom had decided that he did not like the idea of sharing his young, new bride with another woman, so he tried to renege on the agreement, igniting the entire episode, which Kalpana swore was intended to 'fuck her happiness'.

Kalpana's world view resonates with a larger activist perspective that positions coming out as a precursor to respect, recognition, and visibility. Yet, for many

queers in India (and beyond), the question of visibility – and of coming out – is tied to the complexities of kinship relationships, to the nuances of social networks, and even to issues of class and social respectability. Close-knit communities and the near ubiquitous obligations for marriage and heterosexual reproduction create the foundations of economies of honor, shame, and respect that translate into a family's social standing. Individuals are constituted primarily through their relationships to the broader social structure, to kinship. This is not a denial of individuality but rather one that recognizes a person that inhabits the world and makes choices through his or her relationality to others (Reddy, 2005: 36). In the parlance of Hindi speakers *log kya kahenge* (what will people say?) shapes the range of behaviors and information that individuals make public. Such a framework not only makes kinship an indispensable mechanism for social organization, but also renders issues of family and social respectability central to how individuals constitute themselves. Among the Mumbai queers I have worked with, coming out risks not just compromising personal respect, but also subjecting their families to censure, gossip, and rumor.

Manish, a 25-year-old gay advertising intern, grew up in a heavily Catholic enclave in the Mumbai suburbs. Despite coming from a conservative, religious community area, Manish is active in the queer scene in Mumbai. From being a core team member for an LGBTQ youth support group to participating in queer flashmobs, his closetedness at home might seem unlikely and perhaps even untenable.

If I was probably in some other city away from all these people, I could wear my sexuality on my sleeve and not give a damn. But since you have all these people around, you want to keep it low key. You don't want people to find out about it because in a society like this one it is very shameful. They think homosexuality is something to joke about. They will poke fun at you but then they will poke fun at your family. I don't want to put them in that kind of a situation that they have to come to terms with me.

Gossip, rumor, and the prying eyes of neighbors denote the widespread social effects of individual decisions. Coming out would leave Manish's family vulnerable to censure and social shame. However, not publicly disclosing his sexuality to his family and to his broader community is not an act of complete disempowerment, or something that prevents his flourishing. Instead, silence is something Manish claims is an act of care for his family and their social reputation. His insistence that he should not put his family in a negative situation evokes the social interconnections that individuals navigate in daily life as well as the push and pull between caring for others and living on one's own terms.

Instead of taking this as the total objectification of the individual, Manish's playfulness with the contours of the closet reflects how queerness can endure even through attachments to respectability.³ On the one hand, his desire for a socially respectable image for his family keeps him from expressing his sexual

desires through coming out openly. At the same time, he expresses himself beyond his home space and in public space, at times in places and spaces that could risk his outing, such as the society that he lives in. This presents an interesting corollary to the problem in queer studies of sexuality being relegated to the private space (Berlant and Warner, 1998). In his case, it is outside the home that his sexuality can flourish

It is better to tell people on a need to know basis. And that's my policy. If I think that you really need to know then I will tell you. I mean homosexuality is just one part of me, it's not all of me. And there are so many other things. If that one part of me is important to you then you will know.

Manish's refusal to come out is not simply indifference, but perhaps gestures to what Connolly (1991) calls agonistic respect: a mode of cohabitation that acknowledges limits and conflicts between people, while simultaneously recognizing their interdependence. In Manish's own words, he acknowledges that his desires deviate from a heterosexual version of normalcy established for him. However, he also subtends his sexual expression to respect the fact that his choices do not just affect him but his family.

Connolly's formulation of agonistic respect (difference and interdependence) resonates with the problem of identity, as articulated in queer studies. As Colebrook (2009: 14) argues, it is the queer body 'that exposes the essential tension of autonomy and recognition'. By 'autonomy and recognition', Colebrook means that, in the construction of an identity, a self must be 'performed or given to itself through action' yet at the same time 'self-giving or performing is only possible through others and recognition.' Manish's silence is a way of performing himself through his connection to others, through constructing an identity that coheres to the social norms of respectability, yet seeks points of flourishing through public performance and representation of sexual dissidence. Such a manipulation of identity seeks to honor both Manish's sexual desires and his kinship desires. Although honor, particularly, within scholarship on South Asia, can be a fraught category to denote how familial (particularly patriarchal) reputation is constructed through the sexual purity and control of the female body (Menon and Bhasin, 1998), I want to suggest here that Manish draws upon honor as *izzat* – respect. Reddy (2005) uses *izzat* to expand existing conceptions of honor to include ideas about how *hijras* (transgender individuals who are assigned male at birth) construct modes of respectability that are not inherently rooted through sex and sexual purity, but through an interconnected system of social value. Similarly, Manish channels a form of respectability that is neither about sexual purity nor about an idealized homonormative life. Rather, respectability here is about recognizing and negotiating the ways in which modes of gossip, rumor, and even violence intersect with an urge to care for others, particularly for family. Thus, the silence deployed by queers like Manish endeavors to mitigate a social context in which the public expressions of sexual difference may produce unintended social effects.

The ambivalence of home

For many of the participants in my fieldsite, home constitutes an ambivalent space, where the lines between acts of care and violence become blurred. It is a space where pressures to marry and to reproduce – to save social face – intersect with individual desires for choosing their own forms of love, pleasure, and intimacy. Throughout my work, I have observed numerous crisis cases, where parents have found out about their child's sexual orientation and taken them to reparative and electroshock therapies, kicked them out, burned their identificatory documents so that they could not move out, or physically assaulted them. Thus, decisions about how to reveal (or not) aspects of one's sexuality can be about protecting vulnerable members of the family as much as they can be about maintaining personal safety. Sometimes, nondisclosure is not about an attempt to renegotiate the terrains of home, but just about holding home together.

Rahul, a photojournalist and 25-year-old self-identified gay man, spoke to these concerns in his acknowledgement that the living situation with his family could deteriorate as a result of his disclosure.

I didn't tell my father because he had a stroke 12 years ago and I'm not sure he could take it. I am also not sure he could be understanding of these things at all. Is he homophobic? I don't know. But I'm afraid that he would blame my mother for this and that there would be fights in the house. I'm afraid that he'd say to my mother 'he's this way because of you'. So I don't know if I'm ever going to come out to my dad because it's going to get violent probably and mom's going to be blamed for it because they've not had a great relationship per se. If he's going to take it out on her, then I thought let's not tell them.

Rahul's statement echoes a pervasive idea within the households of many of my interlocutors: that a parent is to blame for homosexuality. And, as Rahul emphasizes, it is often the mother who is blamed for a gay child because her coddling turned her son 'soft'. Here, concerns over domestic violence crash into the desires to live openly. Rahul's concealment of his identity is not just about maintaining a certain level of respectability but also about shielding his mother from violence. Families, like Singh's formulation about neighbors, can turn hostile at any moment. Thus, silence may not just be a condition of possibility for individual flourishing but collective flourishing. Rahul acknowledges the interconnectedness between himself and his family, despite the violence that surrounds him. If agonistic intimacy is a threshold way of life – to live in the interstices of violence and care – then many queers inhabit this space as a way to have both the attachments to kinship and their sexual desires, despite the fact that both may be in contest with one another.

Family, and the structure of kinship that accompanies it, are spaces in which violence is an integral part. And, for some, coming out not only leaves one vulnerable to violence, but also runs the risk of foreclosing sites of pleasure.

Soraiya, a 28-year-old lesbian woman that I met through an LBT-feminist activist group discussed both intersections of violence and pleasure within domestic spaces:

When you look at India it is not safe to come out, especially as a woman. You are tagged as somebody who is basically an overly sexual woman and you know men think they can sort of have sex with you and cure you. There is a lot of pressure for marriages, especially for women. Every woman is expected to get married and so if you do come out there is more pressure on you to get married.

Soraiya suggests that disclosure can mark one as a body upon which violence should be committed through rape or forced marriages. Where coming out could lead family to pressurizing and fixing marriages, nondisclosure may enable some to delay or even avoid the pressure to marry. I recognize, along with many interlocutors fighting off pressure to marry, that such arrangements may be delaying the inevitable.

However, this work also creates opportunities for play, sexual expression, and pleasure. As Soraiya went on to say:

My parents used to keep on asking me to be celibate. Why the fuck should I do that? My father used to say now we need to get her married we need to start to get her married. Many parents don't think about their child's happiness, it's more about society... Since we have no place to go, my girlfriend and I used to meet and we used to sit in my car. I mean you can do a lot in a car [laughs]. Otherwise there are rickshaws. You can do quite a bit in rickshaws as well [laughs more].

Soraiya's laughter suggests her amusement at the idea that she should deny herself sexual pleasure before marriage, especially since she identifies as a lesbian who will never marry. More importantly, her having sex against the sanction of her parents, especially with women, demonstrates more than just her individuated search for pleasure and sexual expression with her partner. It is also about playing with the limits placed on her own body by her parents. Although such a limit is – at least for her – an unrealistic expectation, her participation in sex acts with her partner in cars and rickshaws works against the ways that she has been socialized to think of her body. For Soraiya, her searches for pleasure, particularly through sex, not only seek to displace norms around what kinds of associations one may have, but also disrupt certain forms of bodily discipline. These disruptions need not even rely on being out or disclosing sexual identity to still do work to challenge what is acceptable. If anything, being out would restrict and undercut the kinds of independence she might have to seek out pleasure. The fact that such transgressions of boundaries take place within submission to familial expectations is important because it demonstrates that even within relations of queer subordination there are pockets of contest, resistance, and play, even amidst impossibility, silence, and failure.

Conclusion

The tendency of some queers to inhabit, claim, and persist through silence, through neither naming nor disclosing their sexuality to family, provides a unique lens for examining how people dwell in contradictory and conflictual spaces. Occupying positions of uncertainty and unpredictability, such as the family that could erupt into violence should disclosure happen, highlights the precariousness of queer life and also the multiple kinds of desires to which people aspire. For many, family and dissident sexuality are not ‘either or’ choices, nor antagonistic to one another. Rather, some queers seek to build a home at the interstices between normative and queer life worlds, and silence becomes a mode of brokering such constructions. By turning to agonistic intimacy, I have suggested that we might see kinship as a site of uncertainty and unpredictability, rather than domination or inevitable normativity.

To be clear, I do not intend to romanticize the closet, concealment, or the violences of living at the margins. And I do not valorize silence as purely a condition of queerness in postcolonial or non-Western spaces. Rather, I want to think through how instances of so-called queer absence are actually moments of vibrant presence and contradiction. I take the experiences of those shared within these pages as glimmers of how people endure living in contradiction. Whether it is being completely out in public and closeted at home or choosing not to name one’s sexuality but disavowing marriage, I take these various moments of impasse, where coming out is not tenable, as generative for thinking through the ways that people navigate multiple attachments: to queerness, to family, to sexual choice, to concealment, to silence. I do not see coming out as something that is purely the province of white, Western queer subjects. Although I take Manalansan’s (2003: 34) point that speech, particularly speech relating to coming out, is perhaps a ‘luxury’. Instead, I have considered why and how some subjects are compelled to not speak, when they ostensibly can. Living in such contradictions, in spaces of unpredictability, is perhaps the substance of queer life.

As Manalansan (2014: 94) has put it, ‘mess, clutter, and muddled entanglements are the “stuff” of queerness, historical memory, aberrant desires, and the archive’. Maybe silence gestures to queerness being an open question, a mess of affect, of relations of attachment, and of desires that are not easily reconcilable. I emphasize that silence, even strategic silence about coming out, does not connote invisibility or totalizing oppression. As John and Nair (1998: 1) argue, ‘A focus on the conspiracy of silence regarding sexuality in India, whether within political and social movements or in scholarship, blinds us to the multiple sites where “sexuality” has long been embedded.’ Instead, the interplay of inventiveness, care, and even violence that foregrounds the experiences of queers in India might be central to how we should think about queer kinship and normativity.

Ghosh (2015: 53) has eloquently articulated in work on queer activist organizations in India, that there is an uncomfortable binary between respectability and queer organizing in the West, where the West’s preoccupation with the mutual exclusivity of respectable and queer confuses the means of queer organizing with

its intended effects. The same could be true for theories of kinship and queerness. Although queers in India might be socialized to attach to a respectable politics, their connections to family respectability also create the conditions of possibility for queerer modes of sexual expression that need not be effusive, outright, or obvious, but can be silent, strategic, and ambiguous. Although nondisclosure may not be a choice desirable for all, it is an alternative from the compulsion to name, identify, and replicate the identificatory boxes of being LGBTQ+. More importantly, it signals an alternative to the universalizing narrative of what it means to be queer at a moment when the increased legal and cultural representations of sexual minorities tidy up and standardize the mess of queer being.

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Notes

1. Although there has been emerging research on queer subculture in India regarding literature and history (Vanita, 2001), legal history (Narain, 2004; Narain and Bhan, 2005) and the politics of activism (Dave, 2012, 2011), kinship and family have not received as much attention. However, some have explored the dimensions of kinship and transpersons (Ramberg, 2014; Reddy, 2005).
2. There is an extensive literature in the humanities and social sciences regarding the question of coming out. This work ranges from seeing coming out as a process of verbal disclosure (e.g. Cass, 1979; Plummer, 1995; Troiden, 1989) to more critical work that suggests that sexuality is 'tacit' (Decena, 2008) to work that questions and even critiques coming out (Sedgwick 1990). Extending work on coming out, such as Decena's (2008) turn towards thinking about tacit subjects or even Orne's (2011) notion of 'strategic outness', I am thinking about how the strategic silences can be negotiations of the contradictions between queer and normative life.
3. One might ask how agonistic intimacy might work if participants are closeted. Singh's term agonistic intimacy extends and expands the focus on adversarial politics as well as the friend/enemy distinction to think about agonistics as a mode of daily life. By adding the term *intimacy*, Singh (2011: 445) exposes the ways that the *potential* for hostility is enmeshed within daily acts of care amongst members of varying castes, religions, and so on. The term indexes 'the co-presence of conflict and cohabitation'. Drawing this co-presence into queer experiences of family spaces, I argue that while they may not be out, they perceive their sexuality as conflictual in nature and, at the very least, potentially disruptive. The heterosexual expectations of their parents – and perhaps normative kinship more broadly – are elements of conflict that complicate perceptions of home and kinship. Thus, intimacy is a fraught construct that at once compels silence both out of a fear of potential violence as well as an expression of care.

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