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## Chapter 4

### Sexuality and South Asian Women: a Taboo?

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South Asian women talk freely about sex? You're kidding, right? This would never happen in a million years. Though outsiders perceive India to be the land of the 'Kama Sutra', those of us who grew up in South Asia and the diasporic communities know better. Actual conversations about sexuality – especially female sexuality – are minimal and take place most often in the form of rumours or whispers, and in discreet corners. (Makker, 2010)<sup>1</sup>

Despite the difficulties associated with speaking about sexuality as outlined in the statement above (which probably resonates with many), there have been developments within the South Asian diaspora and India which have attempted to normalize sexuality *and* to move beyond viewing the linked terms 'Asian' and 'gay' as problematic. The subjugation of sexual identities such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' has been met by resistance from a variety of organizations and individuals. Whilst this 'road to freedom' regarding the expression of sexuality has been bumpy *and* is an unfinished project, there is also a great deal to celebrate.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=7417>. Accessed 12 March 2012.

<sup>2</sup> I interviewed women working in South Asian women's organizations about grassroots political activism and political agency. The sample was 29, with diverse religious backgrounds (1 Christian, 5 Hindu, 13 Muslim, 10 Sikh). The in-depth

This chapter therefore traces what we mean by sexuality and the contradictory ways in which (hetero)sexuality is perceived and understood in South Asian communities. It then moves on to looking in more detail at lesbianism and the developments in recognition of alternative sexualities. It will be shown that living in the closet is preferable to ‘coming out’ for some women due to the violence of internalized oppression and reprisals within the community.

### **Expressing Sex and (Hetero)Sexuality**

One understanding of sexuality is that it involves sex and human desire therefore it ‘would appear to embrace ideas about pleasure *and* physiology, fantasy *and* anatomy [involving] the realm of the psyche and the material world’ (Bristow, 1997: 1). The pleasure principle in sex relates to individual choice yet its expression also invokes high levels of anxiety. Jeffrey Weeks writing in the mid 1980s stated that: ‘it [sexuality] has become a moral and political battlefield [and] there is a struggle for the future of sexuality’ (Weeks, 1985: 4–5). Sexuality therefore is not just a matter of individual choice. It involves negotiating moral, cultural, religious and political terrains, something which has featured in the struggle by South Asian women.

Historically, sex and sexuality feature in all societies but when it concerns South Asian women it is a taboo subject (Ratti, 1993). Rani Kawale (2003) notes that discussions about sexuality are unacceptable in South Asian communities, its respectable form being limited to the confines of marriage and religious rules (op cit) with pre-marital engagement in sexual relations prompting considerable anxiety (Puri, 1999). This moralistic stance is seen to be contradicted because India continues to be seen as the land where the *Kama Sutra* originates. This famous book appears to feature Indians as erotic beings – a kind of exoticized sexuality that acknowledges the sensuality involved in: ‘learning how to be a happy heterosexual’ [and how] heterosexual identity is learned as a phobic marking of what you are not’ i.e. homosexual’ (Bhattacharyya, 2002: 24). Similarly, racialized discourses have presented

South Asian women simultaneously as exotic, licentious and repellent rendering 'lesbian sexuality largely invisible' (Brah, 1996: 79). It would appear therefore, that happiness and sensuality are usually associated with being male and heterosexual whilst women's roles are seen as contradictory and ambiguous yet *necessary* (Holland et al., 1998) – after all it is the body of the female that is required for men to achieve normative heterosexuality.

The aim of this chapter is not to present South Asian women as a homogeneous group but as members of communities that hold different attitudes towards honour and shame. Women's bodies are usually thought of as carriers of tradition, culture and the honour of the family, therefore it should not come as a surprise that community surveillance operates as a deterrent to 'illicit' heterosexual activity amongst young women. Women are often seen as complying with this moral code or 'rules' for acceptable expressions of femininity because the penalty involves loss of reputation, unmarriageability, ostracism from familial structures and in some instances violence. Young women are for these reasons 'faced with an apparent choice between personal liberation and cultural loyalty' (Das Gupta and Das Gupta, 2002: 113).

Communities and families are therefore central to how we can understand the presumed 'compliant' behaviour of and adherence to gendered sexual norms by South Asian women. However, there are many opportunities for South Asian women to engage in pre-marital sex and this is evident when young women take full advantage of their parents' wishes to attain a high level of education by studying at a university away from their home town. It is a strategy employed by many to win freedom (albeit for a short time) and to escape the restrictions imposed on them (Wilson, 1978, 2006; Brah, 1996; Rait, 2005; Bhopal, 2010), although recent commentary notes an increase in those who remain living with their parents (Bhopal, 2010:101). South Asian communities have also recognized how educated women are able to negotiate for an educated marriage partner and simultaneously improve the social status of

their parents (Ahmad, 2001; Ramji, 2003; Tyrer and Ahmad, 2006). Sexual involvement at university, therefore, poses a small risk compared to gains made in the marriage prospects of daughters. Despite the moral code surrounding sex and sexuality South Asian women in the diaspora and in India have and continue to circumvent control over their bodies by engaging in pre-marital sex (Wilson, 2006; Puri, 1997; Das Gupta and Das Gupta, 2002). At the same time, there have also been developments in many cultural forms which have brought the issue of sex and sexuality to light.

### **Sexualities and Cultural Forms**

In the last decade developments concerning the celebration of South Asian women's sexuality, has included Meera Syal and other South Asian actors featuring in the production of *The Vagina Monologues* in Britain. The show seeks to celebrate female sexuality and challenge a number of taboo subjects. An equivalent called *Yoni Ki Bath* was produced in the United States by South Asian Sisters in 2003 following a daring move by the Kimaaya Theatre Company (Bangalore) to produce *The Vagina Monologues* in India which resulted in protests by lawyers against it. *Yoni Ki Bath* is still being performed and it has proved to be a resounding success, covering subjects such as 'domestic violence, abuse, menstruation, masturbation, orgasms, marriage, religious faith, and political protest' (Makker, 2010). Such performances simultaneously raise awareness of the control exerted by the community and family whilst empowering actors, contributors and audiences. Their agency is brought to the fore and can be contrasted to representations of female sexuality in Indian popular cinema whereby a woman is presented as either 'good' (upholding traditions and morals) or 'bad' (deviant and sexualized). The narratives of these films support the 'good' woman based on the *devi* (female goddess) who does not transgress boundaries i.e. who lacks sexual agency. The 'bad woman' is constructed as the 'whore': 'the immoral temptress who lures men to their destruction with her abundant sexuality [because] she challenges the status quo and may

have the power to overturn it completely' (Das Gupta and Dasgupta, 2002: 116). Another representation of women involves the revenge narrative and usually concerns women as victims of rape or gang rape seeking revenge on men (Gopalan, 2008).

Although cultural forms do not necessarily herald greater freedom for women, the creation of these spaces is important because they challenge powerful discourses of female sexuality, particularly when there is female transgression. Transgression is shown in Monica Ali's fictional work, *Brick Lane* (2003) which represents a (seemingly) passive diasporic woman who goes through a 'sexual awakening'. The Bangladeshi community, in its attempt to regain control over women's sexuality under the guise of racism, threatened to hold protests against filming an adaption of the novel in London's East End in 2006 – such is the fury of patriarchy when it is challenged. Patriarchal control in South Asian communities expects women to conform and uphold respectability through self-sacrifice and the denial of self-expression. Although disempowerment in South Asian communities is variable, where such disempowering discourses exist for heterosexual women, how can women who are considered 'other' i.e. lesbian become empowered, claim their agency? The empowerment of South Asian lesbians is related to structural issues of power. Located at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, we can see that prevailing patriarchal discourses privilege men over women *and* heterosexuality over homosexuality. Indeed 'empowerment can be seen to be a dynamic which has to be constantly and continually negotiated and this is particularly the case in individual sexual relations' (Carabine, 1996: 27). However, if the personal or the individual is emphasized, there is a risk of losing the collective nature of political mobilization, including challenges to current constructions of heterosexuality, and its connections with violence against women, by the gay and lesbian movement (Rich, 1980).

To return to cultural forms, we have witnessed a significant representation of homosexuality in films, television drama and literature alongside a growing visibility of

people with ‘other’ sexualities. So has the battle been won? It would appear not when we give some consideration to subjugated identities within alternative identities: a South Asian lesbian identity has been long in the making.

South Asian culture is rampant with homophobia – but a homophobia so silent that people literally don’t know the language for homosexuality [...]. It is viewed as a Western phenomenon even though images of gays and lesbians have been part of the history of the subcontinent for thousands of years [...] There are also references to homosexuality in the Kama Sutra (Khan, 2002: 65).

The most noticeable works here include Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* (1996) in which two married women become involved in a ‘forbidden’ relationship and the provocative and questioning collection of photographs by Parminder Sekhon and Poloumi Desai (2003) in *Red Threads*, which shows the existence of a vibrant British Asian ‘queer scene’. Although *Red Threads* has not generated a negative response, the film *Fire* which was shown in Indian cinemas in 1998 attracted a violent response from the right wing Hindutva party Shiv Sena. Interestingly the negative appraisal of the film was not only made by right wing Hindu nationalists but also left leaning feminists, commentators and journalists (Gopinath, 2005). This was not the first time that a cultural form depicting ‘other’ sexualities had come to the attention of the public and the moral brigade in India. In 1942, Ismat Chughtai’s *Lihaf* (*The Quilt*) written in Urdu was published and created controversy for presenting a tale of the relationship between an upper class Muslim woman and her female servant. The relationship is viewed through the eyes of a girl who witnesses noises made by the two women from underneath the quilt. Predictably, Chughtai was charged with obscenity in 1944. The controversial nature of the book was in its representation of the desiring female body which

was deemed to be a bigger threat than the desiring homosexual male. Thus we return to the body of the female which is a battleground upon which the integrity of the nation rests, therefore, *The Quilt* and *Fire* were seen by many as stains on the impeccable character of the Indian nation and a contamination of Indian culture (Vanita, 2009; Gopinath 2005; Derne, 2000; Kapur, 2000; Thadani, 1996). Sexuality as a site of agency depicted in *Fire* and *The Quilt* poses a threat and a challenge to *expected* heteronormativity of South Asian women. Cultural representations are therefore important creative spaces where alternative or ‘other’ sexualities can be presented, although the link to real lived experiences may not be so straightforward. This is evidenced in the problems associated with ‘coming out’ as opposed to living in relative safety within the closet.

### **Sexuality, Agency and ‘Coming Out’**

The coupling of the words ‘Asian’ and ‘gay/lesbian’ appear to be problematic i.e. a contradiction with each regarding the other as ‘the other’. Yet men and women have shown that they can be both in history. Homosexuality is not a recent phenomenon brought on by exposure to western, liberal values that has resulted in the corruption of South Asian youth morality. Homosexuality has existed in ancient India yet there appears to be selective amnesia regarding this fact as demonstrated in *Sakhiani* (Thadani, 1996). Thadani researched lesbianism in India which dates as far back as 4000 BC and in her introduction to the history of same sex relationships she comments on ‘othering’.

My aim is to excavate layers of erotic memories and thus recreate historical continuums from the location of the present context of lesbian invisibility [...] [It is claimed that] in one form or another that homosexuality came from the other, be it Western, Greek or Arabic. This technique of “othering” functions as a form of exiling, rendering invisible and

excommunicating anything which may be seen as representative of homosexual and homoerotic traditions (Thadani, 1996: 6).

Far from 'rendering invisible' the work of Ruth Vanita (2002) demonstrates the impact of homosexuality (existing in a variety of cultural forms) on the Indian subcontinent. This includes attempts to marry by lesbian couples in India revealing how women who have had no exposure to western ideas of sexuality have expressed their desire to be with a same sex partner (Vanita, 2009). The marriage of a same sex couple is based on the love marriage Hindu ceremony between an ancient heterosexual couple (Shakuntala and King Dushyanta). Indeed when there is opposition to this union by family members there are also reports of joint suicides. The invisibility of lesbianism, the lack of a word for this sexuality (see also Pande, this volume) and the isolation experienced by women, some who were married who identified themselves as 'married lesbians' is also evident in India in the early 1990s (Thadani, 1996). Whilst the situation in India has changed, some women prefer to live in the west where they are 'free' to express their sexuality.

This is implicit in the constructions of the lesbian as western and exiled from India. For those who have the choice of living in the 'West', the question is posed in terms of the choice between a physical cultural exile, a rupture with one's past, or a sexual exile. The consciousness of one's lesbian identity makes it even more painful to live out a semi-closet existence (Thadani, 1996:119).

However, within the South Asian diaspora, 'the "lesbian" is [often] seen as "foreign", as a product of being too long in the West, and therefore is annexed to the "host" nation where she may be further elided – particularly if undocumented – as a nonwhite immigrant within both a mainstream (white) lesbian and gay movement and the larger body of the nation-state'



(Gopinath, 2005:18–19). It would appear therefore that moving to the West does not resolve these tensions: the South Asian lesbian ‘exile’ is faced simultaneously with exclusion from the diasporic identity (for not being heterosexual) and the gay (male) and feminist identities (for being lesbian/Asian/black). This is not necessarily an easier path for living as a lesbian or coming out (Ratti, 1993; Suriyaprakasam, 1995; Siraj, 2011). This is reflected in the views of the women I interviewed in a recent research project:<sup>2</sup>

I think women find it hard to disclose their sexuality. (Meena, Director of Asian Women’s Project)

This is the twenty first century, but I still think it is hard for women to be able to even conceive, as a South Asian woman, conceive of being a lesbian. And then having got to that space to realize it, and then to talk to families about it, it’s huge [especially if] there was no support and there was no network in terms of really being able to equip women to be able to do that [...] I think one of the hardest things for South Asian women is the fact that there is no space to be an out proud South Asian woman, who is a lesbian. (Zoe, Consultant LGBT issues)

I couldn't do that to my dad and mum. I don't know what would happen if I told them ... personally I have a few friends that are gay and they're actually considering not telling the family and just going ahead and getting married because they just don't feel they have ... they're just not empowered enough to make the choice.(Sofia, Refugee Worker)

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<sup>2</sup> I interviewed women working in South Asian women’s organizations about grassroots political activism and political agency. The sample was 29, with diverse religious backgrounds (1 Christian, 5 Hindu, 13 Muslim, 10 Sikh). The in-depth semi-structured interviews lasted 45–120 minutes.

These narratives provide insight into the reluctance of women living in the UK to reveal their sexuality, intensified through fear of ostracism, isolation and violence. This is despite the progress made in cultural representations and the existence of Asian LGBT support organizations. One interviewee also referred explicitly to the reluctance of heterosexual women living in a refuge to accept that lesbian women fleeing violence due to disclosure of their sexuality were also suffering violence against women.

It's a difficult one because I think there's still a lot of uneasiness and people are uncomfortable talking about it [sexuality]. We ask the question about their sexuality at the point of referral but some women will just be uncomfortable in answering that or they might just give you the answer that they think that you probably want to hear. But there are women who will tell us what their sexuality is. We've had women in the refuges who have been lesbian and we've had to deal with the issues in terms of living in a refuge with other women who have been showing... like prejudice around that [issue].(Meena, Director of Asian Women's Project).

Thus, even within the confines of a safe space for women fleeing violence South Asian lesbians experience rejection, judgement, disapproval (Thadani, 1996). Such contexts mean it is unsurprising that women attempt to hide their sexuality, including through entering a heterosexual marriage. This denial of one's sexuality can be understood as a form of internalized oppression to avoid stigmatization and loss of honour for the family. Although one would assume that preservation of honour would result in self-preservation, it is not necessarily the case. This is evidenced in the rising numbers of South Asian women who experience mental health issues such as depression, self-harm and suicide (Fenton and Sadiq-

Sangster, 1996; Chantler et al., 2001). Various writers have also commented on this with oppression and the threat of violence cited as taking a heavy toll on South Asian women's health and bodies (Burman et al., 2002; Burman and Chantler, 2003; Anand and Cochrane, 2005; Barn, 2008; Raleigh, 2009). Indeed being a lesbian (of any race) in the west has been shown to be a risky business – research suggests that the more closeted a woman is about her sexuality (passing as heterosexual) the more likely she is to suffer from mental health problems (Mooney-Somers and Ussher, 2000), a theme echoed by one of the research participants.

Coming out is also a critical transition period and in terms of coming out, it's a bit like disclosing HIV status. You don't necessarily do it once, you have to do it over and over and over. And that can be quite difficult and challenging but over the years we have seen a difference [...] Lesbian and bisexual women may come in to contact [with the Project] because of mental health problems or self harm or something like that [...] For BME women, the issues are further compounded because of stigma and fear of disclosure. So they're less likely to disclose their sexual orientation. (Avtar, Sexual Health Project Director).

Silence around sexuality is still found amongst South Asian women involved in same sex relationships in urban landscapes. Whilst the city affords them some anonymity, they continue to live their lives in the closet because they choose not to reveal their sexuality to families, friends, colleagues, community and even to themselves. The most subjugated identity is that of the Muslim lesbian which is taken up by Asifa Siraj (2011) in her study of one lesbian woman, not in a relationship, who remains in the closet for fear of reprisal from the community.

They are silent, silent, absolutely. Not just women but other vulnerable sub-groups. You know, those who are homosexual, lesbians, and gays. (Dipika, Director Asian Women's Project).

There are of course South Asian lesbian women who refuse to remain in the closet but the coming out process can result in a range of responses.

I told my mum when I got my job at the Lesbian and Gay [Organization], because wherever I work my mum rings, you know, there is always something to ring for and being a lawyer there was a sense of, a problem [comes up] you sort it out. So, I had to give her my number and if I gave her my number it would say Lesbian and Gay [Organization] yea? So I gave it to her and I thought ok, I have to tell her. When I told her, she said: "I have just bought some new curtains upstairs, come, come to have a look at the new curtains upstairs." I am thinking I have just made the biggest disclosure ever, and I just was not sure I got too upset myself, but what was fabulous was for her to take in that information [and] to be able to respond to me immediately.. (Zoe, Consultant for LGBT issues)

Coming out for this participant was within the boundary of the mother-daughter relationship and she had not told her father. Although her sexuality was 'accepted' it was never referred to again. Similarly, another participant talked of how she had come out to her mother and the community yet the attitude of the community baffled her.

My mother thinks what right do they have to say to me and her when I go to [home town], saying to me, "it's still not too late to get married!" It's not too late to get married! And you know

[pause] I have to say [pause] I think the hypocrisy in the community is just appalling. (Anneka, Consultant for Women's Issues).

The lesbian sexuality of this participant was regarded as something temporary that could be 'cured' by marriage. The hypocrisy of the South Asian community is also evidenced by the numbers of girls and women who are victims of sexual abuse and sexual violence (Kelly, 2010; Thiara, 2010). Two participants revealed how they had been sexually abused by extended 'family' members which had resulted in self-harm. Managing one's emotions in a community that on the one hand abuses and on the other holds itself as guardian of morality through surveillance of women's sexuality has struck a chord with activists. The existence of women's projects such as Southall Black Sisters and the Newham Asian Women's Project, that challenge oppression and violence, occupy a position that is central to empowerment and women's agency (Thiara and Gill, 2010; Wilson, 2010).

South Asian women's involvement on issues of sexuality and sexual violence represents a movement towards social change; by no means an easy task for those with a lesbian identity which is further complicated by religion. Organizations such as the Naz Project, the KISS Group and the Saffra Group provide support for members and challenge stereotypical views such as the incompatibility of a lesbian identity with South Asian women, *and* of Islam with homosexuality (Kawale, 2003; SafraProject, 2003). The possibility that new spaces are opening up, especially amongst younger people who also have the support of their parents, was also noted.

We have seen younger and younger people coming out, younger and younger women coming out and making contact with the [...] Project, wanting to come to the [support] group. We've also had parents of young lesbians who have made contact with

us who want to support their daughters. Equally, with some young men as well. They want to support their children but don't know how to go about it because they don't know who to talk to within their own community. They want to know about strategies on how to support their child. We have had situations where parents accompany their children to counselling sessions – they will drop them off and wait for them because they want to see their children move on to a much happier place where they're more accepting of their own sexuality. So we have very much seen a shift, but that's not to say that it's still not a very critical time for most people coming out, BME and non-BME. (Avtar, Sexual Health Project Director).

One interviewee pointed to the need for a holistic approach, where sexuality and violence, alongside women's material needs, were all dealt with simultaneously.

I would like to see an organization that supported South Asian women on a range of different issues from violence to sexuality to child care to education to a whole plethora [...] so that they can go to a place where they can get the support of other South Asian women and they could be part of a process of bringing about change. (Zoe, Consultant LGBT issues).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted how and why sexuality is a complex and silenced subject when it concerns South Asian women. It also highlights gender relations within the 'South Asian community' by examining the role of patriarchal structures that seek to minimize transgression from the moral order and inhibit the expression of alternative sexualities such

as lesbianism. This flies in the face of a growing movement which spans different continents – India, United States, Canada and Britain - that seeks full recognition and equality. The dynamic nature of cultural processes and the increasing role of religion means that women remain under surveillance which in turn means challenging sexist and homophobic practices and discourses is to take significant risks. Yet there is a growing amount of academic and creative literature and cultural forms that deal with alternative South Asian sexualities. What we have witnessed is gradual change regarding female (hetero)sexuality, with young women claiming more freedom. Whether this translates into greater freedom for lesbian sexuality, and for all women to speak about sexual violence, remains an open question. The narratives of women working in organizations that challenge violence alongside the silencing of female sexual agency are testimony to the importance of women continuing to voice resistance to oppressive practices and violence and imagining a more optimistic future.

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