



Research Paper

Embodiment of Homonormative Queer Intimacies in India

Meghjit Sengupta

*Received 18 July, 2021; Revised: 01 August, 2021; Accepted 03 August, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.
Published with open access at www.questjournals.org*

The body can be said to be the central arena where the play of sexuality is located. A lot of work on homosexuality during the last decade of the twentieth century is located around the HIV-AIDS pandemic and how (bodily) health remained a major issue for a lot of queer people, in that period of time (Weeks, 1985: ch.1, 3). Even in India, a lot of academic literature on queer lives surrounded the AIDS pandemic and the clinics that were slowly cropping up for the purpose of treating queer people and their issues (Reddy, 2005: introduction, ch. 3). Sexual health has remained at the helm of sociological enquiries into queer lives, while being attached to a notion of imagining queer bodies as sexual bodies. I would like to contend that in most instances, a queer body is imagined mostly as a desiring body and it seems to be difficult to imagine without attaching the notion of sexual desire to these bodies. These notions of sexual desire however don't really transcend the boundaries of heteronormative notions of desire where one partner is imagined to be the feminine and the other – the masculine. Notions of penetrative sex remain as important in queer intimacies as it is in heterosexual notions of intimacy. This paper seeks to indulge in questions that interrogate whether at all there are possibilities of escaping notions of heteronormativity in queer intimacies. In doing so I shall explore how heteronormativity is reflected through homonormative desire and femmephobia in the queer community. I shall be also referring to the interviews I've taken of English-educated young men of Kolkata who are sexually attracted to other men. By the term 'queer' I will be referring to men who are sexually attracted to other men, throughout this essay.

In moments of intimacy, there are certain issues that colour the ways in which queer individuals relate to each other. In this paper, I shall only be talking about queer men who are attracted to other men. Anthony Giddens (in Heaphy, 2007: pp. 122-131) talks of how a kind of 'confluent love' based on equality and mutual derivation of pleasure satisfaction, along with a sense of fragility has come to mark most intimate relationships in late modernity. He says that the act of sex is untied to the institutions of kinship, marriage and procreation and notions of 'pure relationship' have come to mark present day where each partner has the liberty to exit from that relationship at any time if they deem that they are not being satisfied. He also purports how heterosexuality becomes 'like homosexuality' since there is a weakening of institutional bonds like that of the family and intimate relations were gradually being identified as forms of 'pure relationship' where the partners are equal to each other, beyond sexual differences. For same-sex partners, creative ways are operationalized, in which mutually satisfying ways of being in an intimate relationship are practiced. This seems to be emulated amongst heterosexual partners as well where the basis of intimacy is placed upon how mutually satisfying the relationship is.

Linda Peake (2017; pp. 1) purports:

The power of heteronormativity is evident in the privileging it lends to other supposedly natural signifiers with which it is most associated – monogamy and marriage. In other words, heteronormativity is understood as most completely institutionalized when performed in a family setting in which a man and a woman...are legally bound to remain with each other for life.

She further states that this ideology has so firmly based its dominance in the society and in people's minds that its 'signifiers' come to be desired by non-heteronormative individuals as well. Such 'assimilation of heteronormative ideals into queer lives' is referred to as 'homonormativity' which is revealed in desires to get married, 'form long-term monogamous couples, and to have children. A lot of the present queer activism seems to be appropriated and tamed by heteronormative structures of the society and state, where equal marriage laws and legality surrounding queer families have developed. In recent times, the state has also involved itself in much of the research surrounding sexually transmitted diseases, and especially the HIV-AIDS pandemic. The

television series 'Modern Family' also represents one such gay household where two gay dads adopt a daughter and seems to provide a narrative of living 'happily ever after' as any 'heterosexual' family would be imagined.

Wendy Cealey Harrison (2006: 39-46) has provoked a lot of thoughts regarding sex, sexuality and gender. They have questioned the very validity of sex and something 'natural' – since, if it would be so natural, then there wouldn't be people actively identifying as belonging to a sex, different from what they had been assigned at birth (trans individuals). They also contend that the very notion of a 'different' or the more commonly used, 'the other' sex is a part of a script that the heteronormative society provides us with. The genitals become something the society assigns meaning to, through forms of culture. For instance, the native Americans have always believed in the notion of a 'two-spirit' person – who is supposed to transcend the general division of male and female, based on their clothes, face tattoos or even the length of their hair or who they were engaging in sexual relations with. Hence it is not only gender that is social, but also sex that almost becomes something, influenced and shaped by the understanding of a larger society. Even the notion of transitioning from one an assigned at birth sex to another, depends on how we perceive these two sexual existences, that are inevitably situated in a heteronormative sense of conceiving particular genitals as belonging to a particular 'sex'. It can be concluded from Harrison's (2006) contestations that even in the notion of 'transgenderism' is latent a sense of heteronormativity.

While Anthony Giddens contends how heterosexuality becomes 'like homosexuality' in the late modern period, I would rather argue against it. In GayatriReddy's (2005; ch. 3) work, it seems that the gay identity is referred to in a more egalitarian sense, or that is what her respondents believe it to be. Being gay is simply based on the fact of desire, where one man seems to sexually desire another man, according to her work.

However, there is much more nuance to it, as has been pointed out by Aniruddha Dutta (2014; pp. 145-157). In the garb of "personal preference", a lot of these gay men practice internalised homophobia, misogyny, ageism, femmephobia, transphobia and body shaming quite openly on a lot of online dating applications and sites. There are scores of profiles where the bio descriptions have made explicit extremely problematic notions that form a key part in the queer male community in West Bengal. This is also true on a global level. On doing a visual survey on a 'gay dating app', I personally found at least thirteen out of twenty five profiles where it has been explicitly mentioned how 'old men' and 'feminine/girlish/girl-like' men must not text these men who themselves are hiding behind their photo-less profiles. Dutta quotes a few of his respondents in order to make the point. For instance, there were profiles which mentioned: "unfit, uneducated and feminine guys please don't bother." There clearly are sexual hierarchies in gay dating which are denied by most gay men to be thought of as systemic relations of power that are 'reflected within and perpetrated through such individual preferences'. Gender variance is often looked down upon within a community that was actually supposed to be a space for gender variant people to express themselves.

Queer intimacies thus seem to impinge upon the embodiment of being able to perform the sexual act in certain ways. One of the first things that any of these dating app users ask is "what is your position/preference". This has been talked of by literally ever person I've spoken with about their experience on these dating apps. By position or preference, they ask about what they prefer performing during the penetrative sexual activity – whether they like to be the 'top', or the penetrator, or the 'bottom' – the one penetrated during anal sex. It is not only on these dating applications, but also in a large majority of gay pornography that gay sex is shown to be penetrative kind of sex. Penetrative sex has always been linked to the act of procreation which leads to reproduction and has historically been performed in the heterosexual imagination of pleasure. It is not incorrect to say that genital penetration is indeed heteronormative and makes a space in the homonormative imagination of sex and pleasure, where it is widely believed and asserted that a 'top' can only be intimately desiring of a 'bottom' and vice versa.

Avi, a medical student told me on a January evening how he believes:

If I am gay, I will be attracted to other men. These men would be man-like. I don't know how a gay man would be attracted to a feminine man.

Dutta (2014, pp. 149-158) contends how there is a 'plea' among gay men to resist stereotypes of gayness, which basically leads to an 'assimilation' into a heteronormative notion of masculinity. The continuous derision of femme and stereotypically accepted (rather, rejected) feminine performances among the gay community and the desire to be masculine is only a 'putative' or supposed subversion of heteronormative notions of masculinity, since what becomes desirably 'masculine' is a 'chiselled, muscular body, with deep voice, with a big dick and a masculine gait' – as confirmed by several of my interviewees. The body makes its important presence felt yet again – as certain characteristics that certain bodies portray are put higher up in a hegemonic model of what is masculine, attractive and desirable (Connell, 1995; ch 1).

Moreover, queer relations are often played out in a heterosexual model where the stereotypical "masculine" counterpart (or the panthi, or as they are known in Bengal, "parikh") enjoys a lot of power and the loyal submission of the kothi (the one who is penetrated, apparently embodies a feminine role) individual.

Dutta(2014; pp. 158) points out to cases where the kothi puts up with physical and sexual abuse of their partner, which probably feels like they are in a stereotypical, heterosexual relation in an abusive, Bengali-Indian society.

Disapproving stereotypical gender roles and a masculine-feminine model in queer relationships can also lead to a

‘valorization of the normative gender symmetry of the mutually masculine gay couple ... and the concurrent public invisibilization and/or disavowal of gender variance by gay-identified males.

Hegemonic, patriarchal notions of masculinity being valorized in supposedly ‘equal’ intimate relationships of queer men are definitely not subversive of heteronormative imaginings of masculinity. This leads to a new form of marginalisation of gender variant performances of masculinity/femininity/androgyny that marks the lives of a huge majority of queer individuals. This is something that we need to be aware of while critiquing notions of heteronormativity that affect queer relationships.

Whether it is in heteronormative ways, homonormative ways or supposedly ‘queer’ ways of imagining desire, the notion of intimacy among queer individuals have always been attached to notions of embodied intimacy, or so it seems. With the global lockdown during the pandemic, online intimacies have traversed areas of disembodied imagining of taking care of, video calling and even having virtual sex with each other on online platforms, which again question the essentialized notion of genital penetration in the very idea of having sex. Even though this paper has not dealt with notions of friendship mention must be made of how most queer individuals have engaged in group chats and group video calls with other queer friends, while creating an imagined safe space for each other. Making and sharing music, dance, cooking, poetry recitation and such other creative videos between each other while virtually appreciating and sharing intimate moments of joy with each other have positively affected a lot of these people. Online dating has also been a possibility among some of my interviewees who contemplate better future physical dates with their online lovers.

The body remains central in queer intimate relationships. Matters of touch, eroticism, feelings and sensuality lie close to queer imaginings of intimacy and sexuality. Most scholars who have talked about sexuality, have imagined humans as sexual beings by discounting the notion of the body. However, there will always remain possibilities of further queer-ing such contentions through incorporating the asexual experience of love and intimacy – that may or may not lie beyond centring intimacy around issues of bodily engagements in sexual activities. There are further works to be done and doors to be opened regarding this and this work is probably just another key to such a door.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1]. Connell, R. (1995). ‘Masculinities’. Polity Press: Cambridge.
- [2]. Dutta, A. (2014). “Masculinities of Desire, Derision and Defiance: Global Gay Femmephobia and Kothi-Hijra-Trans Heterosexualities. in Rohit K Dasgupta and K. Moti Gokulsing eds. *Masculinity and its Challenges in India: Essays on Changing Perceptions*. McFarland & Company. North Carolina
- [3]. Harrison, W.C.(2006) ‘The Shadow and The Substance: The Sex/Gender Debate’. ResearchGate.
- [4]. Heaphy, B. (2007). ‘Late Modernity and Social Change: Reconstructing Social and Personal Life.’ Routledge. USA and Canada.
- [5]. Peake, L. (2017). ‘Heteronormativity’. ResearchGate.
- [6]. Reddy, Gayatri. (2005). *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Yoda Press. New Delhi.
- [7]. Weeks, J. (1985). ‘Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths & Modern Sexualities. Routledge. London and New York.