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DOI

[10.1080/10357823.2012.739997](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2012.739997)

Publication date

2012

Published in

Asian Studies Review

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wieringa, S. (2012). Passionate aesthetics and symbolic subversion: heteronormativity in India and Indonesia. *Asian Studies Review*, 36(4), 515-530.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2012.739997>

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Passionate Aesthetics and Symbolic Subversion; Heteronormativity in India and Indonesia

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Saskia Wieringa

Keywords

Heteronormativity, India, Indonesia, sexual rights, same-sex relations, sex workers, lesbians, widows, divorced women

Abstract

By exploring the life stories of women in same-sex relations, sex workers and widows/divorced women in Jakarta and Delhi, this article analyses the way heteronormativity marginalises these women, both those who identify as heterosexual and those who do not. To counter the physical, material and subversive forms of violence they experience, they engage in various forms of agency, including symbolic forms of subversion. The focus is on the major concepts developed in this study, passionate aesthetics and symbolic subversion. The narrators in this study deploy overlapping yet distinct strategies to carve out their lives. The subversion of heteronormativity ranges from political, activist intentions, to more invisible, symbolic acts, sometimes self-defeating. These forms of subversion are rooted in both embodied and social, public practices. In this article I discuss some of the major symbolic forms of subversion of heteronormativity that lie in between the ultimate defiance of (self) destruction and the struggle for human/women's/sexual rights. Five strategies will be discussed: seeking economic stability; finding sexual partners; glorifying motherhood; negotiating religious peace and claiming sexual speech. In the last section the embodiment of subversion is discussed.

1.Introduction

Public concern about sexuality is increasing in Asia, and debates on sexual rights have been waged with renewed vigour in the past decade (Wieringa 2010a). Initiated by discourses around demography and population control and propelled by a growing concern about the HIV/AIDS epidemic, issues surrounding sexuality have come centre stage in Asia as

elsewhere (Corrêa, Petchesky and Parker 2008). Yet crosscultural research on the changing forms of heteronormativity is scarce. As I will elaborate below, heteronormativity refers to a system in which sexual conduct and kinship relations are organised in such a way that a specific form of heterosexuality becomes the culturally accepted ‘natural’ order. Thus gender relations, biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and normative gender roles are aligned in such a way that a dominant view of sexual relations is produced. The sexual rights discourse focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual and intersex (LGBTI) communities, obscuring the parallels between the concerns of these groups and others who are marginalised by hegemonic forms of heterosexuality. In this article I extend the sexual rights discourse to wider groups of people who are abjected by the heteronormative gaze in their societies. To analyse heteronormativity as well as the subversion against its dictates, I introduce the concept of passionate aesthetics, defined as the normative structure that underlies erotic desire, sexual relations as well as kinship and partnership patterns that are salient in any given context. Heteronormativity is imposed with the help of a gliding scale of violence: from material (economic and legal) and physical to symbolic. In this article I discuss the forms of resistance against the effects of heteronormativity and locate them on a gliding scale of subversion. The forms of subversion discussed here range from material (in this case economic) resistance to symbolic subversion.

Methodology

The research on which these reflections are based was conducted under the auspices of the Kartini Asia Network (hereafter KAN or Kartini).¹ This network aims to strengthen the links between activists and women’s studies scholars in Asia. Sexuality is one of the five overlapping themes on which KAN concentrates. Kartini members are advocacy groups or women’s/gender studies centres. In this study activists worked side-by-side with academics.

Early on it was decided that research comparing two of the largest countries in the region, Indonesia and India, with their different cultural and religious backgrounds, would

¹ The Kartini Asia Network was formally established in Manila in 2003. Its present headquarters are in Jakarta. It is active in 19 Asian countries and works on 5 overlapping themes: women’s studies; fundamentalism; livelihood; conflict resolution and sexuality. It conducts research, organises training sessions and holds Asia-wide conferences, including one in Dalian, China in 2004 and in Bali, Indonesia in 2008. See its website: www.kartiniasia.org. The present coordinator is the Indonesian women’s rights lawyer Nursyahbani Katjasungkana. The author is a co-founder and presently the secretary of its board. The main funders of this research project were The Ford Foundation and HIVOS.

offer challenging insights into issues of gender and sexuality.² The research was concentrated on the two capital cities and their surroundings, Delhi and Jakarta, as it would be impossible to capture the rich internal variations of both countries in one qualitative research project. Three activist centres collaborated in this project: Jagori, one of the oldest women's organisations in Delhi, the Coalition of Indonesian Women, and the Association of Indonesian Women for Justice; these latter two organisations, though nationwide, have their headquarters in Jakarta. These organisations work with various groups of single women and found that their concerns overlapped in ways that had not been immediately obvious. All three co-founders of KAN, Jagori's Abha Bhaiya, Nursyahbani Katjasungkana in Jakarta and myself, decided to investigate the most pressing concerns of these groups with a view to build better advocacy tools. Three large (sometimes overlapping) groups of single women were selected for the research: widows/divorced women, urban lesbians and sex workers.³

A research team was formed, consisting of activists from the three women's organisations mentioned above.⁴ They were trained by the three coordinators in methods of participatory observation, oral history and discourse analysis and carried out fieldwork between 2005-07. In each country researchers collected, on average, five life stories of women in each category. The narrators in most cases were known to the activists or were contacted via other NGOs. The researchers held between two and thirteen interviews with each narrator and engaged with them in daily activities. The life stories focused on narrators' experiences in their families, their sexual and emotional lives and their dreams for the future. The research results were shared widely with the media as well as with other activists and researchers; it also formed the basis for an advocacy and training program.

In the project we charted the lives of women who live beyond the boundaries of heterosexual normalcy and analysed their commonalities. We analysed the boundaries and regulatory mechanisms of heteronormativity as a symbolic construct in these two important Asian countries. And we explored the scope of the social and sexual agency of our narrators. By laying bare the so-called 'abnormal', abjected categories of sexuality, the creation of and the underlying mechanisms of 'normal', orthodox sexualities were also uncovered, as well as

² The differences and commonalities between these two countries in relation to issues of gender and sexuality will be explored at length in a forthcoming monograph that I am preparing: working title *Heteronormativity in Asia* to be published by Sussex Academic Publishers, 2013.

³ The research resulted in, among other things, a training manual (Wieringa and Bhaiya 2007).

⁴ When I refer to the research team I use 'we'. Although the analysis is informed by the work of the whole team, I am the sole author of this article and responsible for its analytical findings.

the boundaries between them. This revealed the many inherent injustices and unequal power relations that lie beneath the cover of normality and constitute the patterns of the (symbolic) violence of heteronormativity. The passionate aesthetics of heteronormativity were revealed both in the accounts of the life histories of the narrators and in the ways their longing for love and intimacy were thwarted by the norms and institutions of their communities.

Passionate aesthetics

A comparative project such as this one entails the search for concepts that incorporate both commonalities and alterities. Heteronormativity is positioned as an axis of social definition, intersecting factors of religion, class, ethnicity and age. It has multiple nodes, differing in density and shifting in location. Looking at the situation in India and Indonesia, we see both crosscultural continuities and alterities. In both cases a particular form of heterosexuality functions as the hegemonic pattern of the passionate aesthetics in that society. Cultural, religious norms also determine the salience of particular types of resistance and make certain forms of subversion intelligible. Far from being passive victims of the (symbolic) violence heteronormativity acts out on them, the abjected women in this process speak to us of the multiple forms of resistance they engage in, ranging from outright defiance to more subtle accommodations within it. Together they contribute to the slow unravelling of the many strands of oppressions that prevent women (and many men) to follow their desires towards consensual, responsible love relationships, lived in freedom and dignity.

One of the core concepts used in this study of heteronormativity is passionate aesthetics. Aesthetics here refer not so much to standards of beauty but rather more widely to a set of principles that underlie the making of distinctions in matters of morality. I use the Kantian definition of aesthetics here, as I want to emphasise that heteronormativity is a system of values, that, as any value judgment, is subjective, while it is at the same time considered to have universal relevance (Kant 1997). Any aesthetic distinction is based on subjective views, yet acquires a hegemonic power in a given context. The adjective passionate is added to stress that we deal with a system that regulates erotic desires and sexuality. The definition of passionate aesthetics then is the institutions, dynamics, motivations, codes of behaviour and (re)presentation, as well as the subjectivities and identities that together make up the complex structure of desires, erotic attractions, sexual relations, kinship and partnership patterns that are salient in a given context. In our research we were confronted with many examples in which the passionate aesthetics of both societies were different. There is no rational reason why in Indonesia widows often remarry, and divorce, though frowned

upon is common, while in India widow remarriage is strongly discouraged, at least in most castes, and divorce is very rare. Likewise, the level of abjection that sex workers faced is different in both countries. Some Indonesian sex workers harboured hopes of marriage and establishing a 'normal' family, while none of the Indian sex workers we interviewed could imagine such a future for themselves. Or, another example arising from our interviews, in both Jakarta and Delhi some lesbian women would like to officially marry their partners. Same-sex marriages are possible now in a handful of countries, but not in Indonesia or India. All these cases indicate subjective patterns and value statements, yet they have acquired the status of 'truths'.

Passionate aesthetics thus underlie particular regimes of heteronormativity because heteronormativity is a system of values, that, as any value judgment, is subjective, while at the same time it is considered to have universal relevance within any given society. These norms also underlie the sexual subcultures of widows, sex workers and lesbians who, in different ways, strove to achieve some semblance of 'normalcy'. Though the passionate aesthetics informing erotic desires and love may have many ennobling characteristics, they may also have effects of violence, both in the physical and in the symbolic senses.⁵ One of the elements of passionate aesthetics is its ability to maintain the internal cohesion of heteronormativity; in constant processes of expulsion and repulsion, abjected others are created while the inner core group is silenced or seduced into subjection.⁶

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity cannot be reduced to heterosexuality, for a number of reasons. Though it is composed of the interplay between gender, sexuality and heterosexuality (Jackson 2006), it also extends its effects on people living non-heterosexual lives, or who are currently not in any kind of sexual relationship at all. Not all heterosexual practices or lifestyles have similar status, there are hegemonic and subordinate forms of heterosexualities (Seidman 2005, ref in Jackson 2006, [pls add the page in Jackson 2006 where Seidman is cited] see also Rubin 1989).

Also, as indicated above, heterosexuality itself is normalised, and those who live non-normative heterosexual lives are stigmatised as well. Heteronormativity is more than a reference to a normalised sexual practice, it informs the normativity of daily life, including institutions, laws and regulations that impact on the sexual and reproductive lives of members

⁵ See Bourdieu (1991) for a discussion on the concept of symbolic violence

⁶ See Kristeva (1982) for a discussion on abjection.

of society as well as the moral imperatives that influence people's personal lives.

Heteronormativity then refers both to erotic, sexual and affective practices, to the norms governing those practices, to the institutions that uphold them and to the effects produced by those norms within individuals. These effects can be seen in both behaviours and feelings as well as in the dreams for the future of our narrators and their children.

As Butler reminds us, we are constantly performing our gender, dancing around the norms that govern a particular social and historical context. A norm 'renders the social field intelligible and normalises the field for us' (Butler 2004 p.42). But norms are not stable; in the repetition of the performing of sexual and social norms lies the possibility for revision, she suggests. Norms can best be seen by the effects they produce. Norms help us navigate our daily lives, they constitute a moral compass to guide us in the myriad decisions that must be taken. The more invisible they are, the more effective they can be, as they are less open to contestation. The life stories collected in this project provide rich examples of the effects of the often invisible norms, produced in the lives of those both within and outside of the institution of normative sexuality. The passionate aesthetics displayed in these life stories demonstrate how heteronormativity is continuously produced, reproduced and also how change is possible, by displacement, partial adherence, fusion, subversion or downright rejection of the dominant norms. Heteronormativity is not homogeneous nor does it produce uniform effects. Gender and age differences are important intersecting variables, as are ethnicity, religion, caste and class.

In most present day cultures the core of heteronormativity is formed by sexual difference and gender relations, both conceptualised as binary systems, and discursively produced under the assumption that humanity is neatly and 'naturally' divided into the biological categories of female and male. Any variation from this model is not acceptable. A second binary is the split between 'normal' and 'abnormal'. A third, less commonly noted characteristic is that the 'abnormal' category is further subdivided into various types of abjection, while their shared origin has become blurred. Discussions on intersex bodies and transgender practices might have disrupted these binaries, but unfortunately these conversations hardly enter into mainstream discourses and policies (Blackwood 2005, Fausto-Sterling 2000, Peletz 2009, Wieringa 2010b).

The three categories of women we researched are similarly constructed as 'abject' by their heteronormative societies while they are each set apart as distinct categories. The narratives went somewhat like this: widows deplored their social marginalisation but were

happy they were not sex workers or lesbians; sex workers felt dejected because of their degraded status but felt proud they were independent income earners, unlike most widows; the lesbian activists suffered many forms of abjection, but experienced satisfaction in fighting for sexual rights, unlike the case of what they considered to be the meek widows and the rejected prostitutes.

These blinkers make it difficult to see through the barriers that keep these three groups apart from each other. They see each other as differently abjected others and constantly weigh their relative distance from the socially valued 'normal' in comparison with other groups. Their point of reference remains the heterosexual patriarchal family, not the commonality of their positions as falling outside of its boundaries. The Indonesian widows can hope to become 'normal' again when they marry, even if they become secondary wives.⁷ Sex workers with a stable boyfriend in Jakarta expect that they one day will leave sex work and live 'normal' lives. For middle class widows and for sex workers in India these routes seem closed.⁸ Lesbians do not want to create 'normal' heterosexual families, but some of them replicate certain aspects of that in their current same-sex relationships. Most of our narrators dream of future happiness in circumstances resembling those of the 'harmonious nuclear family' which created such havoc in their lives in the first place, either through their parental families or in their married lives. For most of our interviewees their parental or own families have never been the safe havens that heteronormativity promised them. Yet they still wish to create a 'happy heterosexual family' for themselves or their children. The widows and sex workers do not blame the heteronormative construct for their current status of abjection, but rather their own individual bad luck. The lesbian activists see through the myth, but not all of our narrators were activists who were prepared to fight the heteronormative system. Lesbian activists generally felt they had little in common with sex workers and widows/divorced women. Many activists also structure their private lives along at least some major aspects of the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990). In the following section I will concentrate on the forms of subversion of heteronormativity we encountered.

Symbolic subversion: This crazy energy

Heteronormativity entails a system of pleasures as well as of physical and symbolic violence. Its subversions may likewise be divided into manifest rebellions and symbolic forms of subversion, ranging from self-defeating, yet defiant actions of (self) destruction to ostensible

⁷ See Marianti (2002) for an exploration of the socio-economic conditions of widows in East Java.

⁸ See Sen (2001) for widows in India and Jameela (2005) on the autobiography of an Indian sex worker.

adaptations to the model. Open, physical, visible struggles include outright rejection of the model and the claims of sexual agency in the human/women's sexual rights discourse. In our research we encountered a wide variety of such rejections, from the open defiance of the women activists of sexual rights groups, to more subtle, invisible forms. Below I focus on the symbolic forms of subversion that our narrators engaged in.

How do women marginalised by the passionate aesthetics of heteronormativity cope with their exclusions from sexual normalcy? What is the repertoire of (symbolic) subversion that they deploy? And what motivates them to 'choose' the particular kinds of agency that they display? There are no easy answers to these questions. First of all, many intersecting factors play a role such as class, caste, religion, ethnicity, and age. Also, the women themselves cite different reasons for their life choices. Yet in all cases, searching for their own paths, finding ways to survive economically, selecting their own sexual partners, negotiating social respectability involves a departure from heteronormativity. Even if they ostensibly, publicly accept its hegemony, their very actions reveal subversion, or, what Scott (1990: 137) referred to as the 'hidden transcripts, the disguised ideological resistance' of the dominant order.

In spite of this great diversity, it is fruitful to look at the forms these women's subversion of the heteronormativity in their society takes from the point of view of a continuum - from downright resistance to (partial) compliance and even to defiant defeat. Most of our narrators move along various points of the continuum in the course of their lives. In our life stories we obviously have no accounts of a single or double suicide. In the case of a double suicide, when a couple of women lovers publicly go to their death together, usually because they are denied the possibility of staying together, the ultimate unmasking of heteronormativity is encountered. The myth of the 'harmonious patriarchal family' is uncovered for what it means to those who are unable to live by its norms: a cruel power play that may end in death for those who cannot accept the particular form of happiness promised, for who in fact this form of 'happiness' is a poor travesty of the bliss they had found for themselves.⁹ By openly proclaiming their love in death, a love which was prohibited when the partners were still alive, the lesbian double suicide can be seen as the ultimate defiance of heteronormativity.

⁹ A subsequent research project funded by the Kartini Asia Network and the Riek Stienstra Foundation involves 11 teams of researchers in 8 countries in Asia and Africa, working on issues of women's same-sex love, including the violence the women experience. The team of the Kolkata-based lesbian group Sappho for Equality documents some of those double suicides.

Some of our narrators already felt a deep urge in their childhood to reject normative girls' behaviour, clothes and toys, such as Ayesha, (Delhi) a masculine-looking woman: 'Since childhood I felt this crazy energy about myself. I never liked sitting at home and playing with dolls like my other sisters did. I always liked to make friends with boys and play hide and seek in the afternoons.' Others, particularly widows, only discovered later in life how restrictive society's norms are.

Women with same-sex desires, particularly those who identify as butch, such as Ayesha, often stated that they had been born with their desires, and they more or less openly defied the heteronormativity that singles them out as 'others'. In their case, the effects of socialisation seem to influence their choices only in a limited way (see also Wieringa 1999 and 2007). They apparently have liberated themselves and reject heterosexuality, but the passionate aesthetics of heteronormativity are stronger than that. For to differing degrees they too stay within the gendered social boundaries of their communities. They are thus doing an intricate balancing act. By rupturing the sex-gender nexus they subvert those norms, while at the same time embracing certain aspects of it. Yet however convincingly butches may perform their masculinity, the fact that they have female bodies renders their masculine swagger suspect to the outside world. The butch performance of masculinity is profoundly cultural yet complexly related to bodily desires.¹⁰

In terms of partnership, courtship and parenting a butch-femme couple may publicly conform to the particular workings of passionate aesthetics that underlie the hegemonic form of heteronormativity in their context. But in a deeper sense they embody the falseness of the hegemony that heteronormativity projects. In our research Ayesha and her partner managed to hide their butch-femme relationship under a cloak of friendship. In this way, they were allowed by their families to maintain their partnership. They realised they would not be accepted if the nature of their relationship were known and envied the 'normalcy' of their siblings. Their choices were limited: what to do when Ayesha's partner would be forced to marry a man?

Divorced women may not show open defiance but may search for 'normalcy' through, for instance, a remarriage (even if as a secondary wife for Muslim people) or by glorifying their role as mothers. Here socialisation into the specific forms of passionate aesthetics seems to have the desired effects: ostensibly they attempt to remain within the confines of the norms set for their gender. Yet the fact that they search for economic independence, for instance,

¹⁰ See for further examples of female masculinities Wieringa, Blackwood and Bhaiya (2007).

when dependence on males is the norm, or demand the right to choose for themselves their intimate or sexual partners, sets them aside from their ‘normally’ married neighbours.

Sex workers live their marginalisation in different ways. As proud income earners they defy the norms of women’s economic dependence on male providers.¹¹ As lovers they seem to be free to select their own partners, yet some of them feel they need to hide the skills they have acquired professionally in order to live up to standards of sexual modesty. A major concern for many of them is to educate their children (for which they work hard) in such a way that they don’t follow in their mother’s footsteps yet respect her choices.

The subversion of heteronormativity then covers a wide range from open forms of defiance and rebellion to more covert ways, rooted in daily practices in more or less subconscious strategies for survival. As heteronormativity largely rests on patriarchal control over women and particularly their sexuality and partnership pattern, subversion encompasses various forms of resisting patriarchy. There is often a thin line between defiance and defeat. The risks of defeat are multiple, particularly when women have children to look after. On the one hand, a certain amount of defiance is needed to survive, socially, economically, emotionally and even physically. On the other hand, too much defiance carries with it enormous risks – social isolation, economic hardship, and the dangers of slipping even further down the gliding scale of heteronormativity. Subversion then should be seen as a continuum of practices and motivations, from visible, physical forms of resistance, to more invisible, symbolic forms. In the following I will discuss five symbolic strategies of subversion of heteronormativity we encountered in our research. Due to limitations of space I will largely ignore the many cultural, political and religious differences between the two research settings.

1. Seeking economic stability;

An important component of men’s control over women is their economic power. Achieving financial independence is thus a critical first step of moving on the path of subversion. In various interviews that we held the search for economic stability was stated as a prime concern. The Delhi widows, for instance, represented a wide diversity of class, caste, religion, age, education and professions, from a ‘respectable teacher’ to a domestic helper. While some of them were poor illiterate women, others were educated and came from middle class homes. The poorer women disliked their work and resented the fact that they have no alternative to

¹¹ See also Murray (1991) for a study of Jakarta-based sex workers.

domestic labour for which they receive a pittance. Their job brings neither pride nor much economic security yet it is the only way to feed their children. The middle class stigmatised Hindu widows cling to their identities as professionals such as teachers as it offers them the safety of ‘respectability’. Indian widows are not supposed to remarry, in contrast to Indonesian widows. In Indonesia polygyny is common among the Muslim population, which pits women against each other.¹² To guard their reputation the Indonesian widows have to go to great lengths not to be seen to socialise with men alone. Yet working outside the house affords them a measure of social respect as they are seen as responsible parents. More jobs seem to be open to them than to the Indian widows. Most sex workers entered into the trade out of the necessity to feed their children, or because they were trafficked. The money they earned was a source of pride for them.

The women in same-sex relations expected to have to earn their own keep. Most of them were either self employed, worked in an NGO, or for a boss. For the butch women, it was often difficult to find jobs in the more formal circuits. Also, as many of them were cut short in their education, as they resisted the feminine dress codes obligatory in educational institutions. For most, having a job was part of their identities as independent women.

2. Finding sexual partners;

A similarly wide range of strategies is deployed to find sexual partners. As the passionate aesthetics of heteronormativity govern sexual partner choice, courtship, and so called ‘proper’ sexual behaviours, those outside it are often expected to live celibate lives and/or are punished for selecting their own sexual partners. Punishment may range from social exclusion to various forms of legal inequalities. All our narrators fell prey to some form of what they considered a ‘pornographic gaze’, the sexualised and objectifying ways in which they are regarded by men, but also by women, in their communities. Sex workers are seen to be always available. But also widows and divorced women are seen to be in need of heterosexual gratification. It is assumed that since they once knew heterosexual intercourse they must now again desire it. It is accepted that this relationships brings financial benefits to the widows.

¹² Reliable figures are hard to get, as many secondary marriages are only registered with a religious official. Several Muslim parties such as the fundamentalist PKS (Partai Keadilan Sosial, Social Justice Party) openly propagate polygyny, as do conservative Muslim leaders. References to polygyny are all over the public discourse, such as the following statement by the Speaker of the Indonesian Parliament, Marzuki Alie: “Many people have ten wives, some of them have four wives, but it never disrupts their work because they can manage them. We have ministers who have two wives, but they can manage them and it does not affect their work, so it is all right, it is their personal matter.” (quoted in *Jakarta Post* September 17, 2011, “Yudhoyono told to sack scandalised ministers”, by Ridwan Max Sijabat.

Some of them in fact managed to find lovers, others decided on another track. None ended up in a similar form of constraint their prior marriage meant to them.

Two of the poor widows interviewed in Delhi managed to live their own heterosexual desires. Nadira was the most eloquent about her need for an intimate partner: for love and affection, and for emotional companionship. She openly admitted to experiencing sexual tensions in her body and demands for sexual gratification. Similarly Ram Dulari reported she missed a man after the death of her husband. At the end of one of the interview sessions she revealed that she had a secret relationship. She insisted on living her life on her own terms and not be bothered too much about the prying eyes of her neighbours. A working class background offers a sense of freedom that the Indian middle class widows do not enjoy.

Mohini, a middle class widow in Delhi, performed all kinds of rituals to keep the spirit of her dead husband alive. She stressed that she never thought of remarriage as she felt that that would amount to cheating her dead husband. Yet even in the middle classes women do exercise their sexual agency, for instance, by refusing to wear only white clothes. That women are forbidden to wear coloured garments, once their husbands have died, is an attempt to desexualise women.

Many women resorted to secrecy and lived double lives, particularly in Indonesia. Often mention was made of black magic, so-called *pelet*. It is thought that particularly widows make use of this feared technique. A typical story of this kind is the following clipping from the middle class women's periodical *Kartini*.¹³ The protagonist went through a series of troublesome marriages and sexual relations until she met her uncle's boss. She lived in a boarding house at the time where she started having a relationship with him. However, he already had a wife and three children. One day she was accused by his first wife that she used magic to make her husband fall in love with her and to get financial support.

In our interviews we heard several similar stories. Widows are always looked at with suspicion, particularly in Indonesia. They are seen as man-snatchers. Some indeed were happy to contract secret, secondary marriages, following a practice called 'Islamic marriage' which allows a man to ignore the stipulation that his first wife must formally agree to his secondary marriage. A first wife does not need to be informed if her husband just registers his second wife with a religious official.¹⁴ Needless to say, the second wife has no rights at all upon the death of her husband or in case of separation; her children from this marriage are not recognised. In other cases, women did not know that the man they married already had

¹³ No. 2141, June 2005.

¹⁴ In spite of efforts to outlaw these Islamic marriages, they are still common.

contracted a prior marriage. It is no surprise that under such circumstances deceit, suspicion and gossip are rife.

Women in same-sex relations are also subjected to a ‘pornographic gaze’, though different in character from that directed at widows. Indian women remarked that their relationship was hypersexualised, as if only their sexual practices determined their identities. Some stated they felt compelled to downplay the intimate aspects of their love relationships. In Indonesia, too, the interviewees realised that they were always primarily seen as sexual beings. Some were very happy in their relationship and had successfully managed to resist the pressures that seemed to predestine them for an unhappy life, as they were seen to engage in sinful sex. Yet others had gotten quite damaged in the process. Listen to the following story of one of our Indonesian narrators:

Like other tomboys, Indonesian Sandy had to fight against the dress and behavioural codes imposed on her by her parents. She once even preferred to go naked rather than to wear the dress her mother had selected for her for *lebaran* (festivities celebrating the end of the fasting month). In her sexual relationship with her first lover, Mira, she played the butch role, but it was her femme lover who prepared the ground for Sandy to seduce her and who led their search for sexual pleasure. After Mira left her, Sandy isolated herself. She feels it is wrong and sinful to love a woman but she cannot love a man. She thinks her major mistake is that she went against her mother’s teachings. She argues she has turned herself into a lesbian, by playing boys’ games with her niece, like horse riding and engaging in gun fights. But now her niece wears the *jilbab* (Muslim head scarf) and is deeply religious, while Sandy has not found such peace yet. She feels insecure and lonely and is often dizzy. She is so full of remorse that she thinks it is inappropriate for a lesbian to come out.

Finding a sexual partner and fighting for the right to love her is a difficult trajectory under such pressures. But many of our lesbian narrators managed to negotiate these problems and lived happy sexual lives.

Sex workers, whose professional lives are invested with “sinful” sexuality, encountered many obstacles on their path to a fulfilling private sexual relationship. Yet both in Delhi and in Jakarta, some managed quite successfully. Two of our Indonesian interviewees hoped to marry their partners and ultimately leave their present jobs. That path did not seem open to the Delhi sex workers we interviewed. They all worked in a brothel and expected to end their lives there.

3. Glorifying motherhood

One of the major techniques used to approach normalcy as much as possible is resorting to or even glorifying motherhood. Particularly middle class widows use this strategy to reclaim their lost dignity. For sex workers too their children are extremely important. Some of the lesbians also have children.

All five Delhi widows we interviewed had in common their sense of responsibility towards their children as single parents. Mohini and Vibha saw their 'motherhood' as a refuge and were willing to sacrifice all their personal needs to prove their moral superiority, 'We gave up our lives for the sake of children'. In a patrilineal and patriarchal society such as India, in which mothers-in-law have a large influence, this may entail a major struggle.

For poor women motherhood is not so much a moral calling but even more so an economic responsibility. Nadira (Delhi) considered it a great relief to see her children married off so that she could begin to fulfil her own needs. For Ram Dulari, (Delhi) being with her children was a luxury. She lived in an insecure neighbourhood with little comfort of a home. The responsibility of marrying off her young daughter weighed heavily on her. In fact, children in the lives of Ram Dulari and Nadira were a hindrance to their own sexual freedom. Samina (also living in Delhi) had no children of her own but found herself responsible for her younger siblings. Yet looking after children also bestowed on poor women an aura of respectability.

The Indonesian narrators, particularly the widows, also took great pride in their children and were very careful to project an image of themselves as caring mothers who would go to great lengths to provide for their children.

The media too contribute to the claim to partial normalcy through the association of sacrifice with motherhood in the case of divorced women. The 8 June 2005 edition of the Indonesian daily *Lamer*, a mainstream journal that carries a lot of infotainment and stories about TV and movie stars, carried a story about the singer Cucu Cahyati, whose life, the journal reported, had changed after her divorce. She felt awkward when nobody accompanied her when she went out. By dieting and working out she started to feel more confident. Singing slowly relieved her stress. But she made it a point to assert she never neglected her motherly duties. When she came home at two o'clock in the morning, she assured the journalist, she still woke up early to help her kids go to school.

4. Negotiating religious peace

Religion is an important and sensitive issue in many people's lives. The widows in our research project, who were closest to the boundaries of normalcy, frequently stressed their

religious credentials. Yet instead of embracing all the adherents to their respective religions and helping those in trouble, religious officials sometimes abuse their power to 'punish' those who fall outside of heteronormative society's bounds. Religion as a means of surveillance in the interests of heteronormativity may bring with it feelings of shame and guilt, which in turn may lead to the breakdown of the religious feelings of the narrators.

The interchangeability of control mechanisms is striking. Religious power holders, officials of other institutions, neighbours, colleagues, all seemed to interact to impress upon our narrators their abjected status. Yet religion continues to play an important role in their lives. And if religion as they know it incorporate their experiences, they set out to shape their own religious interpretations. In the process some of them become very aware of the difference between the institutionalised patriarchal interpretation they are subjected to and their own spirituality

In India women are advised to attend yoga and meditation classes as ways to gain control over sexual desires, see the following letter to the editor of the Indian periodical *4th Dimension*

I am an 18 year old college student. From conversations with friends, I have begun to feel I am more interested in sex than normal girls of my age. This has begun to worry me as I feel I need sex even at this age. Otherwise, I am ambitious and plan to work after I finish my studies. But I do not know if I can control my sexual urge for so long. I am very depressed and often feel that something is wrong with me. What should I do?¹⁵

She was informed in response that sexual desire varies from person to person and there was nothing abnormal about her. She was advised to consider early marriage as it would protect her from having affairs. She could still achieve other goals in life if she delayed having children. In the meanwhile, she was instructed to take up yoga and meditation as ways of gaining greater self-control.

Hardliner groups in both Hinduism and Islam single out lesbian women (as well as gay men and transgenders) for aggressive attack. In India rightwing Hindu groups staged violent demonstrations against the film *Fire* (Deepa Mehta, 1996) which has a lesbian theme (Gopinath 2002, Kapur 2002). In Indonesia in recent years there has been an upsurge of violence by the Muslim militia FPI (Front Pembela Islam, Muslim Defenders' Front). In March 2010, for instance, they attacked the 4th conference of ILGA-Asia (International

¹⁵ In the periodical *4th Dimension* July 2005 p. 33.

Lesbian and Gay Association) and called the Surabaya-based gay-lesbian group Gaya Nusantara moral terrorists. What is frightening is that they are allowed to act with impunity. The police seems to protect the FPI rather than their victims (Wieringa 2010a).

5. Claiming sexual voice

Another important step along the path of symbolic subversion is to appropriate the right to speak out, not only about one's sexual oppressions but also about desires and pleasures. Many life stories are testimonies to the passionate aesthetics with which heterosexuality is imposed within the immediate family and the wider society. Women without a man, it is believed, have no anchor in life and are not supposed to feel, let alone act on sexual desires. Some of our narrators had internalised this ideology, even when they tried to resist it. A corollary is that women have little space to explore non-heteronormative attractions. Also, there are few discursive pathways to start such explorations.

Sexual speech in India and Indonesia differs. In both countries there is a taboo on public speech on sex. Yet, as indicated above, women are constantly watched with a sexual, if not pornographic, gaze. So the sexual, even if covertly, is always present. The effects of this taboo work out differently in India and Indonesia, judging from the interviews collected here. In India, for instance, the association of lesbianism with hypersexuality had the effect of silencing women-loving-women. Several stressed that their relationships centred on the emotional aspects of love, and tended to be silent about the physical aspects of the intimacy they shared with their lovers. They could not claim the legitimacy of their sexual lives in public. Sexual speech then retreats into the private, with self-censorship as a consequence in public.

Another way of evading the pornographic gaze is to project togetherness as a culturally acceptable form of female friendship, as Indian Ayesha and her partner did. Families and the wider society accept women lovers better if they are seen as 'just friends.'¹⁶

In Indonesia, too, there is a taboo on speaking about sexuality in the public realm. Women, particularly those without a male spouse, are supposed to be sexually shy. Yet in daily life sexuality and sexual speech are very much present. Sexually suggestive songs and jokes are appreciated by both women and men. At the same time, women's same-sex sexuality is silenced and stifled under the cloak of a 'women's friendship', as is the case in

¹⁶ See Rupp (2009) for an overview of the debates on whether the nineteenth century female friendships in Europe and the US included erotic and/or sexual components. Sharma and Nath (2005) discuss women's same-sex relations in India.

India. This is changing, as the language of sexual rights is becoming more public, and gay and lesbians groups acquire more visibility.

Indian widows are supposed to have no sexual desires, while Indonesian widows are sexualised. In both cases it takes enormous courage to appropriate the right to have an autonomous, publicly acknowledged sexual life.

The difference between the public sexuality of the sex workers and their private sexual lives leads to surprising silences. Their professional skills are not always appreciated privately. Negotiating in the brothels, on the streets or in the massage parlours the price for their services, the women had to adopt a rather more diffident attitude with their lovers. Very few of them could openly proclaim their sexual wishes.

Conclusion

This study of the private lives of sex workers, widows and women in same-sex relations enables us to interrogate the passionate aesthetics of heteronormative relations in India and Indonesia. The passionate aesthetics displayed in these life stories demonstrate how heteronormativity is continuously produced, reproduced and also how change is possible, by displacement, partial adherence, fusion, subversion or downright rejection of the dominant norms. Heteronormativity is not homogeneous nor does it produce uniform effects. Gender and age differences are important intersecting variables, as are ethnicity, religion, caste and class. The class/caste divide and religion determine to a certain extent the internalisation of a culture of morality and silence imposed on our narrators, in their different contexts. Their subversion of this culture must also be seen in the light of these crosscutting variables. After studying the workings of heteronormativity in India and Indonesia the extent of its symbolic violence, the various ways its orthodoxy constrains those within its boundaries and marginalises the abjected others have become apparent as well as the multiple forms of symbolic subversion of those marginalised .

It is important to see subversion as enabling, considering that heteronormativity is restrictive, it closes off many options in life that our narrators would like to see opened. The opening up of possibilities is not only related to particular practices, such as earning one's own income and sending oneself or one's children to school, or getting a lover. It is also a personal quest to get rid of the mental and moral restrictions. It requires a different way of looking, of not only seeing the straight, heterosexual model as the only possible way of being and relating. It requires a reorientation of normality: to accept the legitimacy of one's own embodied desires, to get rid of the shame and guilt produced by the passionate aesthetics of

heteronormativity. Subversion incorporates both visible, physical and public manifestations of resistance or (self)destruction, such as the struggle for women's and sexual rights, that some of the lesbians we interviewed were engaged in. Those struggles may be seen as the manifest forms of resistance. In this article I have focused on those forms of subversion that are much more hidden from public scrutiny.

Our narrators, all of whom, as intimate outsiders, lived both normative and non-normative lives, whether as children in their natal families or in their adult lives, have experienced both the ways in which women within this structure are policed, as well as the punishment meted out to those who transgress or are expelled from the boundaries of heteronormativity. The violence they experienced ranges from physical to symbolic, from rape to shame.

Symbolic subversion extends from self-defeating strategies, via various forms of adaptation to open rebellion. Along its path we find secrecy, partial acceptance of the codes of normalcy, denial of one's own needs, or the secret search for sexual pleasure, but also hard work, sacrifice and defiance. Our narrators resorted to multiple stratagems to claim their concerns in these spheres as legitimate. NGOs can channel some of this rebellion into a coherent critique of patriarchal oppression. But as long as the grip of the passionate aesthetics of heteronormativity on women's imaginations is still so strong that their dreams are dominated by it, their struggle is uphill. Our narrators prove that subversion of the powerful passionate aesthetics of heteronormativity is possible, even if some are defeated in the process, others have to live in secrecy and again others go through periods of great pain and misery. This study is a testament to their courage.

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