

Uncloseted

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Lecturer in Marketing

Institute of Management Studies

Goldsmiths, University of London

New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK

Tel. +447587410049

Email id- v.kapoor@gold.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

This collection of six poems is based on my reflections on growing up as a gay man in a heteronormative society where same-sex indulgence was outlawed until recently. The previously present anti-sodomy statute in India, political and religious concerns, and class-based social structures that converged to form an unfavorable atmosphere for gendered minorities, serves as the backdrop for these introspective poems. The poems express issues around my sexual identity formation, the intersectional oppression I faced due to my sexuality, the challenging internal conflicts I encountered when I was in “the closet,” the dread I endured for years and that I still embody, and my intense desire for freedom and an authentic identity.

KEYWORDS

Identity, Sexuality, India, Intersectionality, Heteronormativity

Introduction

Even today, LGBTQ + people face different forms of social and systemic injustice in many countries around the world. For instance, the structures ingrained in Indian society foster “interlocking sub-systems that support direct and indirect victimization” of *Kothi*-identified men having sex with men [MSM] (Chakrapani et al. 2007, 358). *Kothis* are feminine and “generally receptive partners in sexual encounters” (Chakrapani et al. 2007, 350). Crimes in the forms of extortion, structural violence, abuse, and forced sex against gender minorities are not uncommon in the country (Misra 2009; Bhaskaran 2004). Even worse, some studies have reported accounts of cops engaging in “violence, rape, harassment and blackmail of MSM” (Chakrapani et al. 2007, 358; also see Elouard and Essen 2013).

Political lobbyists and agent provocateurs engender homophobia in Indian society and try to “mold the non-conformists into a heterosexist framework” (Narain 2004, 147). A specific incident of note is the 1999 release of the lesbian-relationship-based film, *Fire*. The film led Hindu fundamentalists to burn down cinemas, attack filmgoers, and demand a ban on the film that supposedly violated Indian cultural norms according to them (Misra 2009, 22). Under such circumstances, historical discourses on homosexuality have become a campaign target for both liberal and conservative factions in the country with their polarized attitudes toward non-heterosexual rights (Hunt 2011). Hunt observes that “... as far as the conservative constituencies are concerned, religious or political or both, it appears that they are tapping a reservoir of homophobia that has deep roots in Indian history but suitably repackaged for modern India politics” (Hunt 2011, 326). Banerjea (2022) recently lamented the populist discourses political parties in India use to mobilize LGBTQ identities for “thin-centered ideologies” (3).

Moreover, the reaction against the repeal of the colonial era anti-sodomy statute, initiated in 1860 during the British rule in India (Bhaskaran 2004), replenished the “reservoir of homophobia.” Although the scrapping of Section 377 that criminalized homosexuality is a big leap for LGBTQ + rights in India, it has invited huge resentment mainly from religious fundamentalists and conservative groups (see The Hindu Net Desk 2018). Despite Section 377’s repeal, India still has several laws and regulations that discriminate against sexual and gender minorities, subjecting them to structural stigma (Rao et al. 2020). Gender non-conforming people in India are “further marginalized through the axes of caste, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and class” (Upadhyay 2020, 465). The deeply embedded shame associated with homosexuality has led to escalating suicide rates among queer people in India (Narain 2004). In such an arrangement of heteronormativity, homosexuality was and still is considered deviant, abnormal, and corrupt.

To date in India, imposters (some self-proclaimed Ayurveda doctors, alternative medicine therapists, and priests called “sadhus”) claim to cure homosexuality through their therapeutic practices, yoga, medicines, and by invoking the “divine” (Singh 2018; Sebastian and Vikram 2015). Not to mention the heteronormative conceptions of sexuality in several Indian families stressing the continuity of family lineage, which creates further oppressive conditions for sexual minorities. In an environment overwhelmed by sexual behavior prescriptions/proscriptions and the “dominant sexual ethos centered on marriage and reproduction” middle-class Indian men, in particular, have long-suffered enormous anxieties over social normativity (Botre and Haynes 2017, 1012). Botre and Haynes discuss many deep-seated problems of mainly middle-class Indian men such as their concerns over physical and psychological consequences of non-procreative sexual activity and deviant non-heterosexual orientations. Even today, marriage appears to be essential in many Indian families, as it is in some other cultures, and any deviation from gender and societal norms, including homosexuality and singleness, invites a barrage of questions.

The genesis of the following six self-written poems is my own sexual identity, social position, and religious background. I was born gay in a Hindu middle-class Indian society at a time when homo sexuality was not even discussed, let alone accepted. This adversely affected my life and, for years, restricted my self-acceptance. The context described above in which I have grown serves as the backdrop for the following introspective poems.

And the ‘Firm Fig Leaf’ falls

A ‘firm fig leaf’
Soaked in ingenuity
Ripened with me
Never left me either

It coached me to face the winds
Remain unruffled
It schooled me to upend the clout
Slyly get out

Coming of age
Got in the way
Seeking a match
Led to dismay

A life-long itch?
A call for a seed?
A chip off the old Hindu block?
That is how it should be!

The articles of faith have no part
For the uncoupled
Swinging the other way is
But untroubled

Gray eminence
Lay down the law
Brokers sing the song
Obtuse throngs sing along

Pest called 'lust'

Festoons the truth

Nibbles on and on

Preys on us

Ceaseless this becomes

Toting tenacity

As tall as

Its affinities

One firm day

I let the 'firm fig leaf' fall

I chose to settle for who I am

I chose to settle for who I am!

A Gory Deluge

Sect becomes a spear. In the hands of wings.

Lobbyists take in vain. Reformist upswings.

Class pairs with camps. Camps hook on creed.

Creed along with greed. In chorus they mislead.

Spite chokes the air. Venom fouls the blood.

Ugly deals. Crying shames. Create a savage flood.

Homosexuality is abnormality. Tame it perforce.

Homosexuality is criminality. A deviant discourse.

Put on ice the sinners. With such a deformity.
If they fail to bend. Bring on board barbarity.
Burns on bruises. Bruises on whips. Whips on burns.
One after another. Take repetitive turns.

Horses can't have feathers. Nor can we.
Put in order those. Who defy the decree.
Fishes we become. In a gory pool of fright.
Harried by the hounds. Meaty with might.
Our epics look alike. With pages shuffled a bit.
I'm not alone in sorrow. In sorrow I admit.

Empty Erasure

...and with the ethereal glow ablaze
blaring bells call all to gaze
awe and dread in folds of lies
scurried toward the callous skies

yearnings for the pelting rain
loss of face, hard to explain
days within and with despair
melted into nights of guerre

thoughts uncurbed to erase the file
i gave in every now and then

too little, too brief, i tried in vain

i tried again, time and again...

Stains of Search

Across the table, I debated myself

Talked back, locked horns

On springs of thorns

I didn't know: who was 'what'

I didn't know: what was 'not'

An arcane haze obscured my sect

Reared unrest I failed to neglect

I turned over the holy pages

Stood up to unnamed sages

In quest of light, I knocked on all the doors

From sacred shores to tainted floors

Scripts and scriptures were

Lost themselves

Divided faith foundered aground

I failed to ally

Refused to reshape

To dissolve into the hetero scape

I heard my voice in strings of blues

Found myself in ones and twos

Cast my dreams with beads and stones

Vacationed to autonomous zones

But marks of rage still stain my wrist

The gleaming watch hides them all

The 6" Choker

Smoldered in lather

A 6" choker

Quartz marks the topaz

Itsy-bitsy drops

Etch a scratch

Aigrette and baguette

Here and there

A ring of shafts

Oxidized with oil

Shape

Up

And down

Cut

And uncut

Desire in turmoil

Mother-of-pearl

Relieves the abalone

The Ironic If...

If silence is broken. Clans

Will take it to pieces. If

Truth is spoken. Seminaries

Will hit the dust. If

Facts are stripped. Nudity

Will run from pole to pole. If

Deeds are audited. Misdeeds

Will hit all quarters. If

People are unmasked. Masks

Will sell in heaps. If

Pontiffs are uncloaked. Deceit

Will spring in leaps. If

One has to spell 'honesty'. One

Will require no sweat. If

One has to prove it. Ages one

Will take. If

A true value is assessed. Nowhere

Will it be found. If

Integrity is sought. One

Will go underground. If

Verdicts are adjudicated. Profanity

Will eclipse the earth. If

Mirrors are shown to people. 'They'

Will themselves fall apart.

Concluding thoughts

The above poems are about my sexual identity formation and “coming out.” Several consumption studies have examined issues around gay men and their identity formation (e.g. Schofield and Schmidt 2005; Haslop, Hill, and Schmidt 1998; Hsieh and Wu 2011; Kates 2002; Kapoor, Patterson, and O'Malley 2020). However, given the diversity and heterogeneity of LGBTQ + people some scholars have cautioned us against using any totalitarian narrative that makes us believe they are a monolithic category (e.g. Kates 1999; Keating and McLoughlin 2005). The poem *And the 'Firm Fig Leaf' Falls* draws attention to the intersectional axis of age and religion, which may pose challenges for LGBTQ + people in cultures where marriage and family lineage are still considered too important to be interfered with. Quite similarly, the poem *A Gory Deluge* also underlines the intersectional oppression created by categories such as class, religion, and politics. These two poems echo

the consumption studies on intersectionality (e.g. Gopaldas 2013; Gopaldas and Fischer 2012; Gopaldas and DeRoy 2015; Hein et al. 2016; Steinfield et al. 2019).

From a methodological standpoint, arts-based research (ABR) methods have much in common with intersectionality studies in their objectives of revealing oppression and transforming unjust social practices (e.g. Falcón 2018; Ausdall 2015; Wing 1990). Besides heeding the incessant calls for including poetic voices within the research tradition of interpretive consumer studies (Sherry and Schouten 2002; Tonner 2019; Downey 2016; Rojas Gaviria and Canniford in press), my poems make a case for using arts-based research methods to inform our understanding of intersectionality.

The poem *Empty Erasure* depicts my vulnerability. Several uncontrollable external factors, including stigmatization and repression, may impact consumers' daily lives, making them vulnerable (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005; Hill 1995). However, the poem is not only about my vulnerability, but it is also anchored to my experiential consumption of weather. It resonates with Campbell's (1987) emphasis on imaginative experiences and Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) "experiential perspective [that] supports a more energetic investigation of multisensory psychophysical relationships in consumer behavior" (p. 134). The poem expresses my symbolic meanings associated with weather and how it affects my subjectivities and emotions that form "an important substrate of consumption" (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, 137). The poem is also teeming with elements of fantasy that may help the readers understand my life as a consumer where I articulate my profound desire for dreary days. Such fantasies are closely tied up with my identity development (Seregina 2014). My choice of not engaging in masculine sports (during sunny days) as I considered them inconsistent with my identity, expresses my ideological disbelief concerning hegemonic masculinity (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). My aversion to field sports was a manifestation of my non-consumption (Cherrier, Black, and Lee 2011; Sandıkcı and Ekici 2009). My position at the intersection of

my religion, ethnicity, middle class, and sexuality impacted my mundane consumption behavior such as everyday playing. Such consumption occurs in day-to-day activities and often lacks the element of extraordinariness (Holttinen 2014). My poems show how our inner lives can influence our work and lead to a better understanding of the outer life around us, and how we can apply our personal insights to abstract and discipline-specific takeaways.

Consumers use various coping mechanisms to deal with the hardships they face in their lives, one such coping mechanism being fantasy consumption (Hill 1992). In *Stains of Search*, I mention immersing myself in spiritual readings in quest of “esoteric knowledge” (Rinallo 2009, 61). Consumers’ spiritual quests and their search for the sacred represent a promising field for consumer research (Rinallo, Scott, and Maclaran 2012). In addition, my world was restricted to solo creative pursuits such as music and dance that forged my identity. In other words, my consumption mainly included the arts through which I expressed my pent-up emotions (see Kapoor, Patterson, and O’Malley 2020). They served as my coping mechanisms. The poem *Stains of Search* begins with my identity confusion and my search for an authentic identity. However, it also refers to my fantasies of vacationing in “autonomous zones” of freedom and safety, as well as my refusal to dissolve into the “hetero scape,” by opposing compulsory marriage with the opposite sex.

The suppression of my homosexual desires fettered by societal oppression and the stakes involved in explicit expressions of homosexuality found release in my engagement with artistic practices which I used as a safety valve to relieve the tensions associated with my closetedness. The poem *The 6” Choker* is a poetic depiction of one of my jewelry designs. It epitomizes a cathartic fusion of my desire for transparency, an inner conflict, thoughts of self-mutilation, and a sense of relief at the end. Though many to whom I read this poem perceived it as a representation of the male organ, some others in India understood the cultural facets embodied in the poem. Because of the difference in meanings and the sensibility “alive to a

double sense,” this poem appears to be “camp” (Sontag 1964, 5). The number “6” (called chakka) is interpreted differently in India. Although famous as the “chakka” for a six, and “chaukka” for a four in the cricket match, the most popular Indian sport; the word “chakka” is also the most derogatory word used in India for gay men and third genders. The “6” Choker is about my identity formation which was in a state of flux. It also expresses my unfulfilled desires for freedom and an authentic identity.

My understanding of the pervasive homosexuality developed with age when I came across many gay men who secretly entered heterosexual marriages to fit the expectations of Indian society. As discussed in the Introduction, in India, religion, politics, gender, and class intersect and create power imbalances leading to multiple oppressions for sexual minorities. Having witnessed the self-proclaimed guardians of morality (in India and elsewhere) themselves planting seeds of corruption, wrongdoings, and moral transgressions, I wrote the poem *The Ironic If ...* My “moments of marginalization” (Kapoor, Patterson, and O’Malley 2020) ruptured my trust in institutions, such as Ayurveda and alternative medicine, that claimed to provide a cure for homosexuality. Such trust violations that consumers experience may percolate into disparate categories and impact their personalities (Helm 2004). My voice in the poem *The Ironic If ...* candidly exemplifies such a percolation of distrust in institutions and public judgments representing “consumer cynicism” – “a relatively stable tendency to ... distrust across multiple consumption situations” (Helm 2004, 345). The poem’s extrapolated cynicism parallels the pervasive crimes, injustices, and acts of immorality. Helm (2004) extends the notion of cynicism to the domain of consumption and urges future consumer researchers to explore consumer cynicism. In general, cynicism leads to a “sense of being let down or of letting oneself down, and more darkly, the sense of being deceived, betrayed or used by others” (Kanter and Mirvis 1989, 3). However, my distrust percolated to different categories ranging from “institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations”

(Berlant and Warner 1998, 548). It was not consciously intended as such, but the poem may also be considered an ironic inversion of the colonialist Rudyard Kipling's "If." In particular, the use of irony and exaggeration in the above poem empowered me to express my distrust for the society I grew up in.

The above collection of poems opens several research possibilities for consumer researchers. For instance, there seem to be limited studies in consumer research that have addressed consumers' experiential consumption of weather though some researchers have examined consumers' relationship with nature (Canniford and Shankar 2013). Future research might examine consumers' experiential consumption of weather with regard to their fantasies and coping mechanisms, particularly during their more vulnerable moments. Such investigation might unveil hidden consumption behavior of vulnerable consumers as demonstrated in my own poetry. My poems suggest that there can be several intersectional positions to consider while examining LGBTQ + consumers. And they might deal with the concerns of their sexual orientation in many different ways such as by using various forms of arts or through spiritual quests. As was previously indicated, though arts-based research (ABR) methods have much in common with intersectionality studies, they have not received much attention in studies on intersectionality in our discipline. My poems also make a case for the use of ABR methods to study intersectionality.

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