



SEX IS VOLDEMORT¹

A Qualitative Study to Understand the Experiences of Queer Students during Their School Life in India.

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(Working Paper)

**This paper uses the word “male/boy” only as shorthand for persons assigned gender male at birth and the word “girl/female” only as shorthand for persons assigned gender female at birth.*

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¹ Voldemort is a character in J. K. Rowling’s series called Harry Potter. Rowling, J.K. (1997-2007). *Harry Potter*.: Bloomberg.

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

I. THE PROLOGUE

Let me take you inside a typical Indian school. Yes, I said typical in an article debating social stereotypes. And yet, this school is typical. Wait! I was not actually allowed entry into any government or private school that I approached. I wanted to understand the experiences of queer students during their school years in India (K-12).² For this, I wanted to administer a questionnaire among 7-12 graders³ (Espelage et al, 2013; Poteat, 2007; Poteat & Russell, 2013;

²This topic has been studied to a limited extent in India for e.g. See Nevatia et. al. (2012) which looks exclusively at the experiences of persons assigned gender female at birth with the formal education system in India. Here, the authors stated that, “.....We are not aware of any other Indian study that looks at the experiences of queer people within the formal education system” (Nevatia et al, 2012, p.180). After this study which was published in 2012, Nirantar produced a documentary which was a gender and sexuality audit of the education system in India. (Nirantar, 2014). These should be contrasted with studies of a general nature conducted on the lives of queer persons in India which remark generally upon the unfavorable treatment meted out to them in school. For example, (Chakrapani, V. and Narrain, A. 2012) and (Mohan, S. and Murthy, S. (2013)).

³ The questionnaire had been vetted and received inputs from Prabha Nagaraj, Archana of Nirantar, by Vrinda Marwah and Shivane Sen, Anubha Singh, and by a group of school students who were peer educators on LGBT awareness (Breaking Barriers Group, Tagor International, New Delhi). I had planned to administer this questionnaire consisting of both closed ended questions and open-ended questions, in private and government schools selected on a randomized basis across New Delhi in grades 7th through 12th. Literature review had revealed that most bullying behaviour would occur in the middle school years and would subside by high school (Sullivan,



Rivers & Noret, 2008; Sullivan, 2011) and understand the experiences of queer students through the attitudes of their peers, their educators and through prevalent discourses in the society in which they lived.

When the full thrust of what I wanted to do; that I wanted to talk about sex education; that I wanted to inquire about sexuality, became clear to the administrators of schools, they solemnly shook their heads in refusal. The sensitivity of the research topic, the bad influence on the tender minds of school students, the heavy workload of the schoolgoers and the unavailability of school principals, were all cited as good reasons to keep me away from schools. The Indian Supreme Court may have declared that all fundamental rights apply equally to transgender persons (*National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India*, 2014) and that homosexuality is not, *per se*, criminalized (*Suresh Kumar Koushal and Anr. v. Naz Foundation and Others*, 2013, p.77)⁴, and with these rulings arise a corresponding obligation to abide, on schools (as on other bodies) (*Charu Kurana and Others v. Union of India and Others*, 2014)⁵ but these rulings had not permeated the school system.

Prompted to change my research design, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with queer persons \leq 25 years of age.⁶ The semi-structured nature of the interaction gave me flexibility to modify the interview when required. Feminist methods of learning and sharing had showed me that the complexity of experiences and interactions can neither be predetermined nor

2011; Poteat & Russell, 2013). Additionally, many of the studies reviewed during research had also selected student samples from the middle school years (for example, Poteat, 2007; Rivers & Noret 2008).

⁴ “It is relevant to mention here that the Section 377 IPC does not criminalize a particular people or identity or orientation.” Para 38, page 77.

⁵ Government Schools are bound by virtue of Article 14 of the Constitution: Article 14. Equality before law —The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Increasingly, the Supreme Court is also extending this obligation of equal treatment to non- State actors.

⁶ My gratitude to Anubha Singh and to Prof. Dipika Jain for suggesting this change in research method.



measured completely through variables. I wanted to study the experiences of queer students during school and I wanted to know the meanings of those experiences for them. A quantitative study modeled on a literature based survey with pre-set variables studying the frequency of certain experiences (for example, bullying) would have only allowed me to capture the story as I imagined it unfold (*The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2011). It would have foreclosed the multiple stories that my questionnaire, based on studies carried out in other countries, had not contemplated (Creswell, 2013, pp.47-48). Therefore, I undertook a qualitative study, quite contrary to the predominantly quantitative nature in which these experiences had *hitherto* been studied worldwide (Collier et al, 2013).⁷

This new research method had other advantages as well. It subverted the need to take permission from school administrators and parents. This worked out well, as I later learnt, because many of my participants were not out to their parents. The prospect of answering a sexuality questionnaire, in this scenario, would have carried with itself some element of apprehension no matter how many assurances of confidentiality one may have given. Some students may have felt compelled to not reveal themselves truthfully in this exercise.

Rather than limiting my research to school students, I widened the field to include persons who were ≤ 25 years of age. This age limit accounted for the varying lengths of the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in India and ensured that apart from two of my participants who

⁷ For a systematic review of published studies of health and psychological outcomes of peer victimization of sexual and gender minority youth between 1995 and 2012 and across 12 countries see Collier, K.L et al. (2013). More recently, qualitative studies have been conducted on the experiences of queer students. For example, Mishna, F. (2009).



had graduated from their undergraduate education for no more than two years, all of my participants were either in school, undergraduate or postgraduate programmes. This ensured that their experience with education in India was still fresh in their minds. This age limit also accounted for the fact that some of my participants had dropped out of school due to their experiences and had rejoined school at a later stage.

II. THE PLOT

The school described below is a fiction. It is “created” piece by piece by the fragments of my participants’ narrative. Nothing is assumed. 24 participants have helped me bring this school to life, bit by bit, by recalling their own school experiences, over one and a half years between April, 2014 and August, 2015. Any apprehensions of credibility of recall of the participants are dispelled by the significance of their experiences and by research that affirms that subject to a few considerations, “autobiographical memory is considered to be quite accurate” (Bovarid, 2009, p.280; Rivers, 2001)⁸.

⁸ “Schacter (2001) presented “seven sins of memory,” or ways in which memory distortions tend to occur. Five of these distortions are decidedly relevant to the bullying construct. First, memories are transient in that the more the time that has elapsed since the event in question, the more and faster the memory fades. The blocking distortion may be particularly relevant to the use of peer or teacher nominations to identify bullying behavior, as the respondent may know that a student did in fact engage in bullying-related behavior, but their ability to correctly recall who was the aggressor or the victim may be impaired or distorted. Flash-bulb effects are another robust memory effect suggesting that people tend to better remember events with personal significance or salience over less important events. If the student is currently experiencing a bullying event, he or she may be more likely to remember when they were bullied in the past, at the expense of when they may have been the aggressor; or memory of those relevant events may be magnified regardless of the salience of the actual experience (the bias distortion). Hearing through gossip or other second-hand reports of another student’s participation in bullying may lead to incidence of the suggestibility distortion. Similarly, seeing a name listed on a nomination roster may lead respondents to think they directly saw or heard something, making them more likely to believe they actually did observe or experience it. Likewise, if someone thinks they saw or heard something, they are more susceptible to believing they actually did. Relatedly, according to the misattribution distortion, individuals cannot accurately remember the context where they experienced a particularly memory. Rather, they tend Scales and Surveys to remember what they think makes sense with what they remember experiencing rather than what was actually experienced. Misattribution, susceptibility, and



The only thing that is not fiction is that all my participants are queer: a term used in this study in recognition of the fact that desires and expressions cannot be captured in identities alone.⁹ Therefore, while some of my participants identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender and others identify as Hijra, Kothi, Kinnar, Panthi, Giriya, Khush, Jogappa, Jogta among many others, there are yet others who do not identify in any identity category. They have attended co-educational or single gender schools in different parts of the country. They have attended different kinds of schools: government, private, international, boarding and come from all walks of life, financially.

They are recruited through Delhi based college queer groups and queer community organizations. I accept therefore, that I may have interviewed a certain level of “informed” participant. In other words, the participants that participated in the study had already achieved some level of comfort with their identity as a queer person and gathered socially to talk about issues. Though this will not change their experience, it may affect how they understand it and vocalize it. They are contacted by an email that informs them about the study. They are recruited

suggestibility are particularly relevant to the reliability and validity of eyewitness memories” (Bovarid, 2009, pp.280-281).

⁹ The word queer carries several meanings. It can be understood as a “critique of the normal”; “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin, 1995, p.62). Queer is also a “positionality ... which is available to anyone who feels marginalized because of his or her sexual practices” (Halperin, 1995, p.62). Narrain and Bhan define queer as:

“It [queer] captures and validates the identities and desires of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, but also represents, for many, an understanding of sexuality that goes beyond the categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual”. It speaks, therefore, of communities that name themselves (as gay and lesbian, for example) as well as those who do not, recognizing the spaces for same sex desire and sexuality that cannot be captured in identities alone” (Narrain & Bhan, 2005, p. 4)

It is in this sense that the word queer is used in this article. *See*, the definition of sexual subaltern in (Kapur, R., 2009).



if they are ≤ 25 years of age, reply to the email and self- identify as queer. Two participants are presently in school. They are interviewed upon receiving parental consent. Other school students are apprehensive to interview. Sampling proceeds from purposive (Mishna et al, 2009; Patton, 1990)¹⁰ to theoretical. Interviews are transcribed verbatim and codes are socially constructed using grounded theory: through a line by line analysis of the interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013). Codes are abstracted into memos and memos give rise to emergent themes. These themes are tested through further interviews, only this time the participants are recruited theoretically. I stop sampling when either: 1. the emergent themes are saturated and no new properties emerge (Charmaz, 2006): i.e. the last two interviews in a particular category yield no new results; or 2. I cannot find a participant that answers the description of the emergent themes. The latter is an important limitation of this project. The remaining gaps are filled by perspective interviews with experts who work in the field of sexuality. The findings are discussed and verified by a focus group interview with a different set of queer participants who are knowledgeable in the field of queer activism/advocacy. The findings are also shared with the participants of the study and their inputs incorporated.

With informed consent, all interviews are recorded: for accuracy and to ensure uninterrupted interaction. All interviews are conducted face to face. They are conducted by me. The setting is chosen by the participant.

Requisite institutional review board permissions are obtained.

¹⁰ “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling” (Patton, 1990, p.169). This sampling technique was also used in another qualitative study on the bullying of lesbian and gay youth (Mishna, et.al., 2009).



And thus, we speak of sex. A school comes to life.

THE FINDINGS

I. SEX IS VOLDEMORT

This build up is, unfortunately, anti-climactic. Sexual expression is completely absent from the vocabulary of this school. Even a girl and a boy dating is frowned upon as a *distraction* from studies. No school society or club talks about sexual rights (see also, Iyer, 2015; Sayyed, 2016)¹¹, no educational books stack the library shelves and the biology teacher, when commissioned with the uncomfortable task of teaching sexual reproduction rushes out of the classroom. This is what one of the participant states, *“We did the whole chapter; did the diagrams---. Then you had to read the whole sexual reproduction---. 2 pages---. She was the best teacher we had all year but when this chapter came, the teacher got one of us to read the chapter aloud and then left the classroom. She entered after 20 minutes and said, ‘the chapter is covered.’ We never spoke about the diagrams!”* This is a place where the “workload” of the students keeps their “tender minds away from the corrupting influence” of sex. This is a place where little or no education is imparted on sex. Yes, the girls get the period talk while the boys play football outside and yes, sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancy is discussed.¹² But what more do you need, when your teacher succinctly remarks, *“if you have sex, you will have herpes and die.”*¹³

¹¹ All but one of the participants interviewed revealed that there was absolutely no information available about sexual rights at school. At most, the participants received information about teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

¹² This model of “sex education” has also been found in other parts of the world. In an article reviewing sexual messaging in schools, Janet Shibley Hyde and Sara R. Jaffee find that, “A behind-the-scenes war is being waged in the United States today over the nature and content of sexuality education in the schools. Many school districts have opted to play Switzerland and provide no sexuality education beyond a one-hour session on menstruation with fifth-grade girls.” (Shibley & Jaffee, 2000, p.292).

¹³ As noted by one of the participants to the study.



To be sure, students are having sex (though not always aware of safe sex practices).¹⁴ They are exploring their sexualities, talking to each other about it, cracking jokes; some of it is real and some, bravado. The school however, is silent about this topic. You have to understand, this school is a repository of Indian culture and sex is “the enemy” (Kapur, 2005, p.53). It is, as Kapur states, “something that threatens Indian cultural values, the Indian way of life and the very existence of the Indian nation” (Kapur, 2005, p.53).¹⁵ Whether it came to be so to respond to the colonial experience (Kapur, 2005), or to covet it (Kapur, 2005; Vanita, 2012), or for an undetected third reason, or whether it was always so, my participants and I are sure only of this: “culture is used to delegitimize sexual activities and practices by casting them as foreign and contaminating” (Kapur, 2005, p.52). Sex, then is not just a “negative”, to borrow Rubin’s phraseology (Rubin, 2011, p.148).¹⁶ Sex is Voldemort: He-who-must-not-be-named (Rowling, 1997-2007).

It is in this school that my participants have studied.

¹⁴ As narrated by the participants in the study who were sexually active or knew their friends to be so.

¹⁵ I hasten to add that sex was perhaps not always the enemy. Ruth Vanita’s book *Gender, Sex and the City* illustrates this point. Here, she takes us into the world of *Rekhti*- poetry that flooded the streets of Lucknow in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. These poems were written by male Urdu poets but in the female voice and focused on the lives of women. The *Rekhti* women were not interested in marriage and children but in the “romance of everyday life” (Vanita, 2012, p.1). They spoke of “hybridity, diversity, beautiful people and pleasures of the city, fashion, glamour, and gender- bending practices” and of love and lust- even same sex love (Vanita, 2012, p.1). Additionally, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai have demonstrated through medieval and ancient stories belonging to several religions of the Indian subcontinent, the expressions in writing of same sex romantic attachments and gender fluidity. For a complete anthology see Vanita & Kidwai (2008).

¹⁶ Sex negativity is one of the six ideological formations which Gayle Rubin argues, grip the thought process of society. Sex negativity is the negative worldview of sex in which sex is viewed as a “dangerous, destructive and negative force.” It is considered to be a sinful activity unless there is a good reason to consider it otherwise. Rubin lists some of those reasons as marriage, reproduction and love. The other five ideological formations are sexual essentialism, the fallacy of misplaced scale, the hierarchical variation of sex acts, the domino theory of sexual peril, and the absence of the concept of benign sexual variation (Rubin, 2011, p. 148).



II. IDEALS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

How is counter-heteronormativity, however it emerged, viewed in society today? For this I look at some socio-historical writings. I grant that these explanations may be partial but they serve my purpose. As a project that seeks to question views on counter-heteronormativity, some explanations of its current position are a vital starting point.

A. Socio- Historical Establishments/Solidifications of the Heterosexual Ideal

Michael Kimmel offers one such phenomenological explanation (Kimmel, 2005). In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, Kimmel states, two versions of manhood existed- the *Genteel Patriarch* and the *Heroic Artisan*. The *Genteel Patriarch* was aristocratic, landowning, elegant, devoted to family and confined to rural areas. *The Heroic Artisan* was an independent craftsman, a man of independent economic income, a participant in democracy, devoted to family and largely urban.

All this changed by the 1830s with the emergence of the *Marketplace Man*. The *Marketplace Man* was capitalistic, wealthy, restless, agitated, competitive, anxious, aggressive, absent from his estate and absent from his home. He worked in increasingly homosocial environments and surrounded by men, sought to create his identity in opposition to them. “His efforts at self-making transform the political and economic spheres, casting aside the *Genteel Patriarch* as an anachronistic feminized dandy—sweet, but ineffective and outmoded, and transforming the *Heroic Artisan* into a dispossessed proletarian, a wage slave” (Kimmel, 2005, p.29). He also constituted himself against other identities- non-white men, non- American men, homosexual



men. This is how, Kimmel argues, masculinity came to assert itself in its present form: white, heterosexual, successful, wealthy, strong and perhaps married (Kimmel, n.d.).¹⁷

B. Post-Colonial Scholarship

Writing in the Indian context, Ruth Vanita argues that in eighteenth century Lucknow, masculinity was not necessarily incompatible with singing or dancing or even passionate love for a youth (Vanita, 2012). She corroborates her claim with an anecdote from a Nawab's household in Lucknow. Vanita notes, "Nawab Nasir-ud-Din acted as a woman giving birth. He dressed in women's clothes and enacted labour, attended by many women; a doll studded with jewels represented the baby" (Vanita, 2012, p.20). She states that it was the defeat of the 1857 rebels that led both "the victors and the vanquished to believe that conquering cultures are superior to conquered ones. Many educated Indians tried to remake themselves simultaneously in the image of the conquerors and in that of an imagined purity drawn from remote pasts" (Vanita, 2012, p.24). Mimicking the puritanical values of the British colonizers, the Indian reformers advocated thrift, earnestness and industry (Vanita, 2012). Every act was supposed to have a moral and social purpose- including sex. The erotic and the playful were foreclosed and a pure, passionless, patriotic and devoted citizen emerged in opposition to it.

An alternate explanation is offered by Ratna Kapur. Kapur identifies the rise of nationalism and the age of consent controversies as the moments when an official Indian sexual identity came to be written (Kapur, 2005). Sinha argues that while the British regulated the public domain -

¹⁷ To illustrate, he cites Erving Goffman (1963, p. 153) who once wrote, "In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself - during moments at least - as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior."



contracts, crime, land rights etc., the domain of the home was left autonomous (Sinha, n.d.).

Similarly, Kapur notes,

“The ‘official’ culture of Indian middle class nationalism was elaborated in the private domain- the home- which has important implications on the role of sexuality in the nationalist discourse. The home, as the repository of national identity, had to be protected from colonial intrusions, by women, using their virtues of ‘chastity, self- sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labours of love’” (Kapur, 2005, pp.53 *cf.* Chatterjee, 1989).

Irrespective of the precise moment of its birth, the expected sexuality of the Indian had emerged: The Indian man was supposed to be a provider, earnest, hardworking, dedicated to the country and to his wife. The Indian woman on the other hand was supposed to be pure, devoid of passion (except with her husband), chaste, loving, patient, virtuous, self-sacrificing and removed from sex and sexual expression. The sexual lives of both men and women were regulated through laws and it was unacceptable to have sexual expression outside the sphere of the legitimate *created* by these laws. Because women were supposed to be the “repositories of tradition” (Vanita, 2012, p.29), their sexual lives were monitored more closely and their deviations were thought to have more crushing repercussions on the life of the whole Indian community in general. In addition, there were some roles that the woman was to carry out during the course of her life. Kakar summarizes these roles in three points: “first, she is a daughter to her parents, second she is a wife to her husband (and daughter in law to his parents) and [third] a mother to her sons (and daughters)” (Kakar, 2012, p.66).



I experienced firsthand, this sexual socialization of females while conducting this study. The most important challenge I faced was getting the girls to interview for this project. It took a very long time before girls began to sign up for the study. I thought that they might be finding it hard to trust a complete stranger with intimate details about their life. However, I was getting replies from boys who did not know me as well but were willing to share details with me. Maybe this factor played a part but perhaps, a more significant reason for the delayed responses from the girls was what one participant told me. *“We may be queer but we are still socialized as women. And as women, we are not socialised to talk about our sexual desires.”*¹⁸ As word about my study got around and more people began to sign up for it, confidence grew and I was able to talk to more girls.

III. *ASLI MARD* AND THE EMINEM EXCEPTION: MASCULINITY AND HOMOPHOBIA

A. Asli Mard

Let us come back to our school and see what it means to be a man in this school. Here, boys are continuously trying to be “men”: cursing, hitting, running, playing, dating- like men. They are “quintessentially male”¹⁹ perhaps not so much by looks²⁰, as they are still in school and growing but they talk like a “man” and walk like a “man”. *“Very subtle they are- no hand gestures, no drama, no rolling eyes.”*²¹ Their wrists don’t limp, their hips don’t sway, their voice isn’t shrill

¹⁸ As one of the participants noted.

¹⁹ As noted by one of the participants.

²⁰ As noted by one participant.

²¹ As noted by one of the participants.



and they date *only* women. “They probably listen to Iron Maiden and Metallica and not Justin Bieber”, mused one participant²². They play football and cricket and they are good.

My participants, by this definition therefore, are not “men”. They don’t like to play football and they care about their skin. Although I don’t see it, they remind me that they have a “girly” walk, a “girly” voice and “girly” gestures. My participants are the “girl”, “the ladies”, “the gays”, “the faggots”, “the chakkas”²³, “the Hijras”, “the halwas.”²⁴ But, only one of my male participants is out in this school. Yet all of them are called names. Why? One participant clarifies:

*“It doesn’t matter what your orientation or what your preference is. It’s just who you always are. I know straight boys who can be very effeminate. I know straight women who can be very masculine--err--non-feminine. The problem here is not so much about sexual orientation but gender roles. Any boy, no matter straight or gay, if he is effeminate, will be picked up. Any girl, no matter straight or bi or gay, if she is manly, man- like, she will be picked on.”*²⁵


I suspect that these labels attach to my participants not because of their actual sexual orientation but because they fail to conform to the stereotype of a “man.” The heterosexual norm that operates upon them requires them to distance themselves as much as possible from anything (stereotypically) feminine in order to be eligible for social inclusion (Butler, 1997). The labels attach to my participants for not conforming to their gender expectations. I speak to some

²² As noted by one participant.

²³ Hindi slang for Hijras.

²⁴ Hindi slang for Hijras.

²⁵ As noted by one participant.



participants who are queer but stereotypically male. They do not face any differentiating treatment. I also speak to some students who are not queer but do not visibly conform to the male stereotype. For instance, they do not have a girlfriend or are friends with the “girly guy” in class. That is enough. They are also called names.

B. The Eminem Exception

To be sure, cursing and camaraderie go hand and hand at this school. Students curse each other and simulate sexual foreplay with one another-- getting too close, almost kissing. One participant notes how one of his classmates was the “wife” of the entire class and that the rest of the class boys would pretend to be his “husband” and flirt with him. However, he notes that no one took it seriously. Even if the teacher saw this, he states, she would think that the students were being undisciplined. “*Being queer was so far away from everyone’s imagination*”, he states. Using curse words or derogatory epithets therefore are not by themselves suggestive of a disadvantaged position at school:

“...like people curse generally that’s how our schools were. People in their everyday language curse often and-- I mean they would say, ‘haan bhai kaisa hai tu --they’d say haan chutiye kaisa hai tu.’ [I mean they would say, how are you brother, how are you, you fucker?] I mean to their friends they’d speak in that language but they know they have to class out these terms as a certain set of terms they will use to make fun of ...”²⁶

²⁶ As stated by one participant.



Therefore, some choice words such as gay and faggot are reserved for “making fun” of others. These labels attach not only when a student is not a “manly” man but also as soon as he tries to go against the norm, in any possible way. As one participant states:

“I wasn’t very effeminate. It doesn’t have to be very visible but if you are going against or not conforming, or not being a part of the majority, you were picked on...”²⁷

As Kimmel explains, it is men who rank, accept, watch and approve other men (Kimmel, 2005). Sexism means that opinions of women do not matter much. The pre-occupation then is to be adjudged a manly man- the tag of the homosexual being the worst fall from this state. It is this fear of what other men think of them that ensues a relentless frenzy to seem masculine. I feel this applies to my participants. It feels that there is an almost palpable way of being a man- yes, the definition is shape shifting but intuitively understood. There is an immediately apparent and a “confidentially shared understanding” of how to be a man (White, 1982, p.419). Everything else is, in this situation, gay.

There is a penalty for non- conformity. In this school, you are “gay” if you are too sensitive, too stupid, too smart, too shy or too gregarious, too bookish or too artsy or if you are very good with members of the other sex or very bad with them. Gay is a tag that attaches (in the absence of knowledge of one’s sexual orientation) when a man fails to be approved as a man by other men. Sociologist C. J. Pascoe conducts research on homophobic bullying among school going youth. One of her research participant states, “It doesn’t have anything to do with being gay... fag,

²⁷ As stated by one participant.



seriously, it has nothing to do with sexual preferences at all. You could just be calling someone an idiot, you know” (Pascoe, 2011, p.177). I am reminded of the “Eminem Exception” (Ricki, 2003, p. 72; Villanch, 2000, 39). The rapper Eminem often uses the word “fag” in his songs. Sample this stanza:

*“I’ll still be able to break a motherfuckin’ table
Over the back of a couple of faggots and crack it in half
Only realized it was ironic
I was signed to Aftermath after the fact
How could I not blow? All I do is drop “F” bombs
Feel my wrath of attack
Rappers are having a rough time period
Here’s a Maxi-Pad
It’s actually disastrously bad
For the wack while I’m masterfully constructing this masterpiece yea”* (Eminem, 2013)

Just like the participant in Pascoe’s study, Eminem explains that he uses this word to denote weakness and unmanliness and not to depict sexual orientation. Masculinity is not just compulsory in this school; it is “compulsive” (Pascoe, 2011, p.179)²⁸ and my deviants are caught, to borrow, Pascoe’s term, in the “the fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2011, p.177). As Pascoe explains, “...boys often learn long before adolescence that a “fag” is the worst thing a guy could be. Thus boys’ daily lives often consist of interactions in which they frantically lob these epithets

²⁸ Pascoe attributes this concept as inspired from Adrienne Rich’s Compulsory Heterosexuality (Rich, 1987) and Michael Kimmel’s compulsive masculinity (Michael Kimmel 1987).



at one another and try to deflect them from themselves” (Pascoe, 2011, p.177) To be strong and manly is the norm and anything unmanly or weak or even remotely human is “gay.” In other words, anything unmanly or weak is caught by the “Eminem Exception” (Ricki, 2003, p.72; Villanch, 2003, p. 39).

IV. JAMES BOND AND THE DANGEROUS CROSSING

A. James Bond

Yet, my female participants are not quite treated the same way. They identify as non-conforming in some ways: they play football, ride horses, do not wax their legs, do not date men, get into physical fights, buzz their hair, wear oversized shirts, dominate. They fantasize about their teachers and kiss their cousins. They confess celebrity crushes on Bollywood divas and openly compliment a pretty girl. These “tomboys” are part of the “cool” circle, the teller of “non-veg. jokes”²⁹ and at times, also at the top of the social hierarchy at school. In school, they are “James Bond”³⁰ in the truest sense of the word.³¹ They do not have it as bad as the boys.

As one participant remarks: “*the guys have it tougher than the girls.*”³² An expert working in the field of sexuality and youth clarifies this point: “*Yes, there is a premium attached to “being” a man.*” She states that, “*in a school and in society at large, if a girl wants to wear boys’ clothes and cut her hair, it is more acceptable as she is aspiring to be a man. That is more acceptable than a guy emasculating himself by becoming a girl. But, only within limits.*”³³

²⁹ A colloquial way to denote a joke with sexual content. A dirty joke.

³⁰ As stated by one of my participants.

³¹ As noted by one of the participants.

³² As noted by one of the participants.

³³ Gratitude to Prabha Nagaraj. “लड़कियों में ज़्यादा क्यू ? क्योंकि : मैं लड़की ज़्यादा दर्जा रू में को लड़की किया। दिए स्थान नहीं पुरुष वर्ग स्थान ।” (Borah, 2011, p.23)



Although Kimmel does not, I extend his theory of masculinity to understand what it means to a man-- even for females. There are certain stereotypical ways in which a man can be a “real” man-- they are highlighted in Part III above. The extant sexism in the world means that for both men and women these hegemonic understandings of being a man have more purchase than any stereotypically feminized way of living. “Being a man” therefore, is desirable and females can aspire to this ideal too: as long as it is done within limits.

The experience of my female participants is different from experiences of queer females in other countries who are subjected to more or less the same negative treatment as queer males (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010; Kosciw, 2014; Peter, 2015; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Tierney, 2012). Because the ideal Indian woman is constructed bereft of any sexuality as explained in Part II, if done in the right doses, the short hair and the boyish walk is rendered invisible to the world at large. Those who look at a women’s sexuality only through the lens of, “motherhood, wifhood, domesticity, marriage, chastity, purity and self-sacrifice” (Kapur, 2005, p.55), as Kapur puts it, are incapable of seeing the short hair and the boyish walk as an expression of sexuality. And those who do see it as an expression of sexuality, see it as a challenge, a cute little imitation, sometimes a fantasy enacted for the straight man and incapable of threat.³⁴

³⁴ As one of my participants noted, “two pretty girls-- Okay. People can deal with that. Two men-- not comfortable. If you watch TV, girls kissing-- Okay. Guys kiss, everyone is uncomfortable.”



B. The Dangerous Crossing

This is of course, till the female, does not attempt, a “dangerous crossing” (Butler, 1993).³⁵ One participant clarifies: “*I was never made to feel that something was off* (when she told her friends that she finds one of her female classmates beautiful)...*maybe if I were acting on it, it would have led to something.*” A dangerous crossing can present itself in more than one form: it can arrive with the onset of puberty when the girl is subject to increased social regulation³⁶, when the girl defeats the boys at sports³⁷, when she does not adopt institutional paradigms such as marriage, when she can “get” the girl but the boy cannot³⁸ etc.³⁹

Historicizing the sexual education and experiences of Indian women outside of school
Priyadarshini Thangarajah and Ponni Arasu note:

“women are not attributed any knowledge or freedom to explore their own bodies, leave alone the bodies of others. It is for this reason that same- sex activity among women is often a huge threat and is seen as a significant ‘aberration’ from accepted notions of women’s sexuality” (Thangarajah & Arasu, 2011, p.327).

³⁵ This term is borrowed from Judith Butler’s essay titled, “Dangerous Crossing: Willa Cather’s Masculine Names” However, she does not use the term in the same way as I do here.

³⁶ As reported by a participant. See also, “... की देखें हों कि
|” (Borah, 2011, p.23)

³⁷ As reported by a participant.

³⁸ As reported by a participant.

³⁹ “Since male gender expressions start early in life for many FTM persons, many of them initially suppress their feelings for the fear of the gender restrictions in the family system. When it reaches a stage where it becomes absolutely necessary to reveal their true feelings, the family and other state agencies do not accept the transition or the masculine behavior of a female born person. Many FTM trans people have been thrown out of schools and colleges for their gender variant behavior. For example, an FTM from Bangalore was thrown out of school while studying 9th grade for his gender behavior and attraction to girls as this was seen as a serious problem by the institution” (Mohan & Murthy, 2013, p.27).



Given this context, the authors above-mentioned identify at least three reasons for why any assertion of queerness in females precipitates a dangerous crossing: first, it shakes the foundations of a heteronormative society based entirely on a necessary intimacy between a man and a woman (Thangarajah & Arasu, 2011), second, it has serious repercussions on the only kind of accepted family structure- that of a man, woman and child and third, it casts sex in a radically different light from sex negativity (Thangarajah & Arasu, 2011). It is a demonstration of sexuality within females. An assumption that females are merely passive recipients of passion is after all, an assumption. Asserting a counter-heteronormative sexual identity hits at the very root of this assumption. It shows females as holders of passion and capable of realizing that passion outside of the matrimonial complex. That itself is destabilizing and altogether dangerous (Thangarajah & Arasu, 2011).

V. GANDI BAAT (THE DIRTY THING)

Butler points out that a subject is formed both in the resistance to an external power and also through it. When power acts upon us externally, it weakens us and weakened by its force, we come to accept its terms. In this acceptance, we are changed. Therefore, the argument goes that subjects are formed not only in opposition to power but also through it such that before the power acted upon us we were not really the subjects we now are; we were pre-subjects (Butler, 1997). This she calls the paradox of subjection and her subsequent inquiry then is to think about the psychic life of power (Butler, 2007).

Power allures us because it is the route to a social existence--something that, she states, we all desire. However, she notes that power does not act so simply on the pre/subject. The pre/subject is not a crucible for the simple transfer of power. The agency or the power that this newly



formed subject displays may be radically different from the power that acted upon them (Butler, 2007). What accounts for this inconsistency in which power is transmitted? She finds that there is no necessary teleological connection between the power that acts on a pre/subject and the agency of the subject (Butler, 2007). Therefore, she states that the assertion of power needs to be continuously repeated, if power is to persist (Butler, 1997). The desire for social existence causes us to desire subjection at the hands of this power.

The heterosexual norm, in her analysis, is one such form of power (Butler, 1997). Being a power, it can only persist by continuous repetition and any deviation from it can be seen as a sign of weakness in the power itself. Explaining in the context of societal perception of homosexual desire, Butler explains:

“...the fear of homosexual desire in a woman may induce a panic that she is losing her femininity, that she is not a woman, that she is no longer a proper woman, that if she is not quite a man, she is like one, and hence is monstrous in some way. Or in a man, the terror of homosexual desire may lead to a terror of being construed as feminine, feminized, of no longer being properly a man, or of being in some sense a figure of monstrosity or abjection” (Butler, 1997, p.136).

Now, she states, that there is no necessary reason why any desire whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, must repudiate the other (Butler, 1997). “Indeed”, she notes, “we are all made more fragile under the pressure of such rules...” (Butler, 1997, p.150) However, it is exactly through this repudiation that the heterosexual norm plays out at this school. Butler may poetically remind us that gender is a performance, a fabrication, a falsity inscribed on the surface of bodies and incapable of being true, or false (Butler, 2012) but at this school this gender



performance/heterosexual norm is maintained by condemnation of anything counter-heteronormative and gender non-conforming.

Indeed, this happens at other schools as well. Since 1999, the US based Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (“GLSEN”) has been conducting biennial surveys to assess the school experiences among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students (“LGBT”). These surveys have consistently found that LGBT students face negative treatment at school from their peers and teachers because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The 2015 survey (Koswicz et al, 2014) found that 57.6% of the LGBT students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 43.3% of the students felt unsafe at school because of their gender identity. This feeling of not feeling safe manifested itself in multiple ways: LGBT students were subjected to negative remarks at the school⁴⁰, they avoided school functions and extracurricular activities⁴¹, were verbally⁴², physically⁴³, and cyber bullied⁴⁴ at school. They were disciplined for public displays of affection for which non-LGBT students were not disciplined, they were not allowed to attend school dances with a member of their own sex and they were not allowed to write about LGBT topics or wear clothes supporting LGBT issues.⁴⁵ Similar studies have been conducted in Thailand (UNESCO, 2014), Netherlands (Collier, 2013), European Union (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010), Canada (Taylor & Peter, 2011), Australia and New Zealand (Teirney, 2012) and Ireland (Mayock & Brayn et al,

⁴⁰ While 98.1% heard the word “gay” being used in a negative way, 67.4% heard other homophobic remarks such as “dyke” and “faggot” being used in a negative way (Koswicz et al, 2014, p. xvi).

⁴¹ 71.5% because of the sexual orientation and 65.7% because of their gender identity (Koswicz et al, 2014, p. 13).

⁴² 70.8% because of their sexual orientation and 54.5% because of their gender identity (Koswicz et al, 2014, p. 22).

⁴³ 27% because of their sexual orientation and 20.3% because of their gender identity (Koswicz et al, 2014, p. 23).

⁴⁴ 48.6% (Koswicz et al, 2014, p. 25).

⁴⁵ 25.2% and 23.7% of the students, respectively (Koswicz et al, 2014, p. 36).



2009) among others. All these studies have found that queer students receive negative treatment in school because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Similarly, in our school, gender expectations are made explicit repeatedly in such condemnation and students who do not conform have a precarious claim to their social inclusion. Students, teachers and administrators; all participate in this ritual. Now that the stage is set, let us enter the classroom. Now, sex is Voldemort. Heteronormativity is power and to complicate the picture, let me confirm for you in the words of one of my participants that, “*most Indian families are orthodox and woh in cheezon ko galat maante hain* [most Indian families are orthodox and they consider these things [the participant was talking about his own gay identity] wrong].” As a result, we have some highly misinformed school-goers who think that queer persons are impotent, incapable of erections, diseased and promiscuous. This is what one participant shared:

“I would tell you a very weird incident actually. We were having a late night, and this girl called up her mother. I was just sitting by her side. She was like Mumma mujhe ek baj jayega. And her mumma was like, ‘tum kis ke sath ho?’ She named a friend and me. Uski Mumma was like, ‘voh bhi toh hai, Ladkon ke sath baahar, your dad won’t like it.’ She said, ‘X hi toh hai. Voh Kya ka lega?’ (this friend had informed her parents that [X] was gay). [She was like, mom, I’ll be back by one and her mom was like, ‘who are you with?’ She named a friend and me. Her mom said, ‘[x] is also there—out with boys--your dad won’t like it.’ She said, ‘it’s only [x], what will he do!] I was like excuse me; I’m sitting right here. No matter how, it just pinches you know. I’m not inadequate in any sort of way.”



The quote above explains the misconception prevalent in the minds of school-goers. The girl in the quotation above tells her mother that she will get late but there is nothing to worry as X is gay and the “what will he do” implies that she thinks that just because X is gay, he is incapable of erection and unable to have penetrative sex. This is not to suggest that X would rather be conceived of as a threatening potential rapist by his friends but what is important to understand here is that the friend’s lack of fear arises from the misconception that gay persons are incapable of erection and penetrative penile sex. The lack of fear is not arising from a position of trust of the friend X.

To be sure, most of my participants discover the meaning of the words lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender etc. only when they or someone they know are called these terms and they go home and Google it. Some learn about sexuality through pornography when they accidentally stumble onto non-heterosexual porn, some learn about it through punk rock bands and some learn about it through newspapers, TV serials and movies, of which there are not many in the Indian context. In short, none of them learn about it from their parents or their teachers. The school-goers who go to school along with my participants, as a result of this piecemeal education about sexuality have a varied reaction to apparent gender non-conformity. Some distance themselves from my participants; friendships are lost. As one of my female to male participants who had presented himself as a boy in school for over ten years, remarked, “*the day my friends saw the “F” in my form, they grew silent and distanced themselves from me. They didn’t say anything but I was not their ‘bhai’⁴⁶ anymore.*” Some try to correct them and set them up with members of the opposite sex while others try to teach them the “right” manner of walking and talking.

⁴⁶ Hindi for brother.



The teachers play their part in making sure that they condemn any behaviour that is not in line with the given gender status of the participants. My participants are learning that there is a right way to act as the teacher remarks, “*Janani janise mat kar*” (don’t act like a girl), a right way to write as the teacher comments, “*Teri handwriting ton bilkul kudiyon Jaisi hai*” (your handwriting is like that of a girl) and a right way to stand as the teacher admonishes, “*Kya ladkiyo ke saath khade hona chahte ho?*” (do you want to stand with girls?). As the teachers set such clear gender expectations from the students, one participant remarks, “*Joh bande iske saath normal bhi hote the, they also stopped talking because of the teacher.*” (Even the people who spoke normally to us stopped doing so because of the teacher.) Gender stereotypes are institutional.⁴⁷

My participants fall short of these institutional standards and pay the price for it. These faggots have their pants pulled down; these chakkas are beaten by their classmates; these halwas have their things thrown about; these mithis are locked inside the bathrooms and these lezbos have their notebooks torn and thrown about. They are the butt of jokes and the subject of sarcasm. They are hurt, emotionally and physically and sexually. Day in and day out. They are the subjects of unwelcome caresses, unwanted touching, unsolicited invitations-- “*Aaja meri goud mein Baith ja*” (come sit on my lap); and the receivers of demands of sexual favours; sometimes from the very same teachers and students who shun them publicly.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ The same reaction of the teacher was found in a study in Thailand (UNESCO, 2014, pp.43-46). A different study has found that where the teacher is supportive, they are sometimes still apprehensive to take any measures as they are terrified of the confrontation with parents and not sure if the administration will support them. “So many teachers are afraid to do this kind of work. You are terrified of a confrontation with parents, not sure how your administration is going to support you” (Mishna, 2009, p. 1606).

⁴⁸ “This uncritical reinforcing of gender norms and behaviour is compounded by a virtual absence of meaningful conversations on gender and sexuality, and very limited sexuality education. In this scenario, not only are all students schooled within restrictive societal norms but also any divergence from these norms becomes incendiary,



VI. CHOTI SI BAAT (THAT SMALL LITTLE THING)

Let's be clear: by any measure of serious, scholarly study, the kind propounded by Dan Olweus and others, this is the very definition of bullying. According to the definition of bullying, “a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (Olweus, 2010, p.9).

This school is unfazed by that. No school policy addresses bullying and reporting this behaviour to any teacher is considered to be a weasely act. When these “weasels” do report the bullying to their teachers, who have all this time, been looking the other way, they are met with one of two reactions. 1. The teacher blames them by saying, “you must have done something”; or 2. They give reassurances of taking action with usually, no follow up. Only in exceptional cases is support given to the student and action taken against the bully. However, seldom is this action converted to a teachable moment about sexuality. The very few of my participants who stated that the school took action when they made a complaint stated that their bully was expelled or suspended upon such a complaint. Such drastic measures also made my participants reconsider and withdraw their complaints out of guilt.⁴⁹

This do it yourself attitude of the schools and teachers is succinctly summarized in the words of one my participants when he says, “*teachers are like, tum itni choti baatein le kar mat aaya karo. Schools have this thing, uniform theek hai, lines straight hain, class mein bacchae apna sar bhi phodein, it's okay*” (teachers are like, don't come to us with such small matters, schools have this

or, at the very least, unacceptable. Thus, all those who do not fit into these gender norms or who express non-normative sexual desires find themselves on the margins in such systems.” (Nevatia, 2012, p.177)

⁴⁹Similarly, in a study conducted by Faye Mishna et. al, the researchers found that schools deny the existence of queer students and therefore fail to take steps to address the issues that these students may face. “First, respondents referred to denial of the existence of queer youth; consequently, bullying of lesbian and gay youth remains unacknowledged. Educators, service providers and other adults were reported frequently to adhere to the belief that youth are not lesbian or gay. As a respondent explained, ‘Because communities think they don’t exist, they don’t feel they need to provide services or protections’” (Mishna, 2009, p. 1605).



thing: if your uniform is okay, if your lines are okay (assembly lines) then even if students break their heads in the classroom, it's okay.) In the words of one of my participants, “*the teachers don't realise that if they don't intervene, the bullies get a free pass*”.⁵⁰

As a result, my participants try a host of mechanisms to adapt to this hostile surrounding: they confine themselves to safe spaces (like the classroom during lunch or the staff room thanks to that one kind teacher who understands them), they avoid hostile places (such as the school counselor's room, in some situations), they ignore the violence and stay silent, they try to fit in by dating a member of the opposite sex (what one of my participants called “security blanket” dating), they learn to talk and walk in a more “becoming” manner or they retaliate-- verbally and physically--yes, that's right: an eye for an eye (and the whole world goes blind). Their experiences resonate with studies elsewhere in the world: lower self-esteem (Collier, 2013, p.7; Tierney, 2012, p.4), school absenteeism (Burton et al, 2014, p.43; Darwich et al, 2012, p.385), physical injury (including self- inflicted injury)(Collier, 2013, pp.7,11; Malley, 2014, p.434; Swearer et al, 2008, p.170), suicidal Ideation (Beikett, 2009, p.994; Teirney 2012, p.5), depression, feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Burton et al, 2014, p.43; Rivers & Noret, 2008, p. 183; Swearer et al, 2008, p.170) drug and alcohol use (Bickett, 2009, p.994; Darwich et al, 2012, p.385; Rivers & Noret, 2008, pp.181,184), reduction in educational attainment (Collier et al, 2013, p.7; Teirney, 2012, p.4), and negative perception of school climate (Swearer, 2008, p.170)- all affects observed disproportionately in queer students.

⁵⁰ “Silence on the part of educators and mental health and other professionals devalues the problem of lesbian and gay peer victimization, leading to further stigmatization and disenfranchisement of vulnerable youth” (Mishna, 2009, p.1611).



What helps them is when they accept themselves: conversations with supportive staff and parental figures who tell them that it is not them that is in the wrong. These conversations go a long way in helping them come to terms with their identity. Once they learn to “love themselves selflessly” as one of my participants calls it, they find themselves less affected by the verbal and physical victimization.

Still, that is no way to live. Most of my participants, live with, what Cvetkovich calls, the everyday trauma of being queer. Trauma is used in Cvetkovich’s work not as a medical or psychoanalytical category with which to view people and to fix them. We reserve words such as trauma for pathologies of the mind that can occur only after the most terrible experiences. Examples of such kinds of trauma, cited in Cvetkovich’s work itself are, shell shock and post-traumatic stress disorder. However, Cvetkovich resists a pathologized definition of trauma. Instead, Cvetkovich’s trauma is that set of cultural experiences and responses that arise in the face of “low level ‘insidious’” everyday experiences (Cvetkovich, 2013, p.29). In Cvetkovich’s work for example, the effects of colonialism on immigrant women is used as an example of a trauma creating incident. Viewed in this way, then trauma is more diffuse, more pervasive and requires a reimagining of social structures (Cvetkovich, 2013).

In the context of the present study, I used the category of trauma to classify the everyday experiences of heterosexism and homophobia/transphobia faced by my participants. At first blush, it is difficult to understand this as trauma. Yet, I find trauma within the language used by my participants. This everyday trauma affects my participants.⁵¹ As one participant reports, “*I actually did start falling sick because of it. I was so horribly depressed that I wouldn't eat*

⁵¹ On the everyday effects of trauma see Cvetkovich (2013).



properly. I would go on for days without eating so much so that my mum decided to change my school mid-session.” They find themselves unable to concentrate in school, to finish assignments and report a fall in grades. Some get addicted to smoking and some consider suicide. Some of my participants drop out of school but because, parents make sure that their children are attending school and absenteeism is closely monitored by the class teachers, the participants find it extremely hard to bunk school. Most of them, however, do not enjoy going there. However, some of them do enjoy school despite everything because that is the only place where they can be themselves. Let me be clear, my participants may be victimized by other school goers but they are not just victims; they are the top of their class, top of their debate team, superb artists and go on to attend the best public universities in the country. And yet, this is no way to live.

VII. LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

At long last, the last bell rings and school's out. The participants gather in the playground and exchange notes. I ask them what would help. They all unanimously suggest that only if other schoolgoers and the teachers understood that there is nothing abnormal about being queer, schools would be more fulfilling and nurturing.⁵² One participant narrates a story of change of heart of one his bully:

“My bully, he started dating my best friend, so she told him about my sexuality... And she actually made him understand how it feels to be queer. He is incredibly understanding now. You

⁵² “Importantly, responses by individual educators and adults to homophobic bullying, such as tacitly communicating acceptance for bullying or censuring disparaging comments about gay or lesbian individuals, were seen as significant in facilitating or mitigating bullying, as identified in a study of lesbian and gay high-school youth” (Mishna, 2009, p.1611).



know, one day he was over at my place. It was just the two of us... And then he apologized. He said, 'I'm so sorry.'"

Time has come for schools to talk about sex. Inside the classroom. Time has come for a comprehensive education on sexuality that addresses sexual rights: the right to one's own sexuality whatever it is, the right to express it, without fear and the right to enter loving relationships. Time has come to say no to the bullying of queer students; to educate teachers and staff about it, to stack the library shelves and to openly address sexuality- the perils and the pleasures of it.



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