

**Ebong Bewarish (...and the unclaimed)**

The outcast bodies of unacknowledged gender categories (The Lesbian Narratives)

"what shall I say is reality and what desire?

For those acquainted with the truth, desire is God" (Mir Taki Mir)

The desire is the root cause of social indignation and oppression. Desire for same- sex partner is no less than crime and its consequence can be humiliation, stigma and in some cases even death. This is true even after reading down of Section 377 as law could not overwrite the colonial driven transphobia from the minds of the people and not to speak of the inhabitants of the rural areas who would entirely consider same -sex desire as an Urban import. Whereas Urban metropolis label homosexuality as a Western import. The fear of containing the gender deviant within the prescribed continuum who do not fit into the known gender categories of male and female has resulted into systematic erasure and invisibility of the community people and sometimes leading to honour killing and suicides among the insiders of the community. In this chapter, I would be talking about the much debated incident of joint suicide of the lesbian couples Swapna and Sucheta in Nandigram, a village situated in West Bengal. This incident otherwise suppressed and overlooked by media and news channel caught the attention of a very popular and dynamic Community Care Organisation named 'Sappho for Equality'. They were instrumental in bringing the matter to the forefront and open up conversations around the cruelty and inhumanity of the family members and the villagers who denied to claim the bodies of the deceased probably on account of their dubious gender orientation that was supposedly stigmatized as immoral and uncouth. One of these couples left behind a five pages letter that speaks about their mental agony and suffering that left with them no other option apart from suicide. Sappho for Equality launched a documentary named '..ebong bewarish' (...and the unclaimed) directed by Debolina. This documentary featuring the suicide incident of Swapna and Sucheta unravels the cruelty of the villagers and their attitude of dismissal towards the loss of lives, lives that have been othered by the homophobic villagers. The documentary revolves around the letter written by one of the partners before committing suicide and the people reading the letters weave their personal narrative of self-pain and suffering that brings in an universal sense of anguish and pathos of the LGBTQ Community. In this chapter I would try to analyse the five different stories of the five readers of the same letter including the writer of the letter with an attempt

to unravel the different manifestations of stigmatizations that portray them all as victims of the one and only oppressive and exploitative hetero-normative machinery. But even before I start narrating the experiences of trauma and agony, I would like to go back to the earliest ages of Indian culture and civilization that have strong evidences of same-sex desire and partnership. This is to educate the minds and to illumine them with the spark of India history and classical mythology and to prove their assumptions of considering homosexuality as western import as wrong. Our country is again strongly resistant towards lesbian relationships more than any forms of desire because lesbianism completely erases the existence of males from their ideological framework unlike other gender deviant expressions. Hence quite evident the nation went berserk with the release of 'Fire'(1996), the film by Indian Canadian diasporic director, Deepa Mehta, that portrayed homoerotic relations between love forlorn sister-in-laws located in New Delhi. The theatres screening the film were vandalized, destroyed and burnt. The right-winged Hindu nationalists protested against the film on the ground of showcasing immoral perversion, and anti-Indian desires and feelings alien to the culture of the country. Deepa Mehta was further criticised for being a diasporic director, who was supposedly unaware of Indian family structure and emotional values and hence her depiction of same-sex desire was inauthentic. Gayatri Gopinath quotes Madhu Kishwar, a notable activist and feminist in her book "Impossible Desires". Kishwar condemns the director and her movie saying: "the director lacks and understanding of family life and emotional bonds in India ...I wanted to ignore (the film) as an exercise in self-flagellation by a self-hating Hindu and a self-despising Indian – a very common type among the English educated elite in India". Hence it is evident that queerness is depicted as an alien desire and hence systematically shut off from the mainstream cultural practices and prevented from entering popular culture through art and aesthetics. Ismat Chughtai's short story "The Quilt" (1941) that dealt with homoerotic attractions and relation between a housewife and a maid, had to face similar stigma and condemnation from the then Colonial Government (Lahore Government). The Urdu writer was charged of obscenity specifically in her depiction of female homoeroticism whereas her portrayal of male same -sex desire went unnoticed. Movies and short stories like 'Fire' and "The Quilt" have been specifically banned and stigmatized because they problematized the notion of middle-class respectable, pure and chaste image of womanhood who is a part of patrilinear family structure. In this context Amrita Chhachhi observes women morality codes and laws have "laid out the boundaries of the community and established a particular family structure - patriarchal, patrilineal, monogamous- as the norm". In this regard, both anticolonial nationalism and religious nationalism rely on the female figures as epitomes of "an inviolate, chaste, pure female body". Women cross-sex infidelity is unpardonable but same-sex desire is unacknowledged and rendered invisible as it completely denies the 'man' figure of the heteronormative family structure. Such instances speak volumes about the nation's strong resistance towards female same-sex desire and no wonder cases of Lesbian couple suicides are more rampant all across the nation. The villages are more violent to such relationships and the story of Swapna and Sucheta remains uncounted and is systematically erased from records to emphasize strong denial towards acceptance of lesbian love. The bodies too remain unclaimed that symbolically represent complete isolation and disapproval of the bodies by the so-called normative society. The letter by one of the couples clearly states their last wish to be burnt/buried together signifying union of

the soul as they were denied social recognition. This again brings in the concept of Indian belief of love union for seven ages unlike the Christian idea of separation that comes with death, death is the end of all. The very notion of rebirth and life after death holds good in the Indian context and hence lovers expect happy re-union after death. Hence dying together entails the idea of spiritual togetherness that makes wish-fulfilment possible in after-life. This again is based on the doctrine of Karma whereby the actions in the previous life decide the rewards or punishments in life-after. As Vanita explains in the chapter entitled “Immortal Longings” in her book *Love’s Rite*:

“If two people are destined to be together because of attachment in a former life, social opposition will not succeed in parting them. Taken to its furthest extreme, the theory suggests that if social hostility prevents them from living together, choosing to die together will reunite them in next life”

The willingness to be buried together springs from the historical love stories that end with catastrophic outcomes and the separated lovers crave for eternal union in life after death. This also explains how homosexual lovers from the ancient times wanted to be buried together and preserved in tombs and monuments like the famous Jamali Kamali Tomb situated in Delhi where the Sufi Poet Jamali was buried beside his beloved Kamali right next to him. Sucheta and Swapna were even denied their willingness to be beside each other even after death as the bodies remained unacknowledged and unclaimed and this separation from each other even after death was believed to ruin the chances of reunion after death. The bodies were burnt by the local police authorities as unidentified and unclaimed bodies. Identification of the bodies and the last rites remained a far cry as the family members consciously denied to acknowledge the bodies as their own, the denial that strongly bespeaks of phobia towards same-sex desires.

One of the couples was married forcefully into a heterosexual bond and as per the verdict of the parents and the villagers, the wedlock of one of the couples estranged the partners and agonised them further. The complete disapproval of their homoerotic attachment with each other, forcefully separating them by the institutional weapon of heterosexual marriage finally drove them to end their lives peacefully and silently. Again suicide is symbolic representation of non-conformity. They have established the immortality of their relations by showing their non-compliance towards societal norms and codifications. Consciously or unconsciously, Sucheta and Swapna have resisted the patriarchal tie of marriage and procreation by escaping the marriage trap to be united in some other form of existence- an eternal existence unbounded by dictates and scriptures. An analysis of marriage scriptures or rituals also suggest that marriage is union of two souls and souls are genderless and formless. As aptly mentioned in the chapter entitled ‘A second Self’ in Vanita’s *Love’s Rite*, the seven steps or ‘Saptapadi’ in Hindu wedding ceremony corresponds to seven Vedic verses that discuss the various aspects of marriage and union and exclude mention of procreation suggesting marriage even in oldest scriptures was not merely an agency of reproduction but necessarily of friendship. The seven steps corresponding to seven Vedic verses mainly constitute friendship and reiterate the word ‘sakha’ or ‘saptopadam hi mitram’. In other words the repetition of the auspicious seven Vedic verses is enough for two souls to be united into a tie of friendship which is again considered as the basis of matrimonial ties. As Vanita mentions, “...Hindu marriage is constructed as a type or subset of friendship,

which in the Rig Veda Samhita, is the overarching relationship binding all beings together”. With the only exception that in cross-sex marriages the husband declares his wife as ‘anuvrata’ in the final verse that means a follower or ‘subordinate friend’. Whereas in same – sex couples whether the effeminate partner remains controlled by the masculinized partner will open a new set of discussion and is also subject to exhaustive interviews among the insiders of the community. The signifiers of marriage are rings, garlands and seven steps with seven verses and the same applies for same -sex unions where exchange of rings and garlands are testimonials to marriage ties. Garlands and rings being the symbols of completeness by virtue of its circular shape are also readily used to socially and religiously sanction bonds between same-sex couples. This is also characteristic of ‘Gandharva’ marriage which is alliance based on love and mostly excludes the rigorous ritualistic patterns and vows of Hindu religious marriages. Hence same-sex marriages as always based on love get sanctified by exchanging of garlands, rings and photographs as testimonials of life partnership. The same -sex partners who unfortunately could not end up in wedlock alliances ended their lives by committing suicide. This is no different from heterosexual suicides where unsuccessful love relationships result in end of life. The only difference being the cross-sex love suicides are conceived as common and historically and socially repeated mistakes whereas same-sex love suicides are regarded as aberrations that deserve clinical interventions. This stigma attached to same-sex love is evidently stronger in villages and suburban areas where darkness lies in minds and the fear of illumination to know the truth that apparently appears inconceivable prevents the dark recesses of minds to get ignited. References to women love and childbirth out of two women appear in Padma Purana written in Bengali script in the *Swarga Khanda* section. Quite interestingly as Vanita mentions that in other Padma Purana versions written in Sanskrit and Devanagari scripts, the birth of the child named Bhagiratha is accredited to the patrilinear father king Dilip. Whereas only the texts written in Bengali scripts account for a detailed description of the birth of Bhagiratha to the two youthful widows of the deceased king Dilip. With some deviations in Krittivas’s Ramayana, Bhagiratha is narrated as king. This version of female – female love bond appears exclusively in the revised version of the Bengali script around 14th century authored by Sage Vatsyayana. To continue the lineage of Suryavansha as Rama was to be born as an incarnation of Vishnu in that lineage, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar summoned the Sage Vasistha to bless the widows to procreate miraculously. The Sage cooked rice endowed with special powers that impregnated one of the widows. What is noteworthy here is no special attention or description is given to the love-making or emotion of the two women out of whom Bhagiratha was born. Their love making decision was controlled by God for greater goodness of the universe and they lacked independence in taking their decisions. The pregnant partner even regretted for having a fatherless child and wanted to end her life by drowning for fear of social acceptance and the Deus ex machina arrives in the form of God Brahma who prevents her from ending her life as the lineage has to be continued for the future birth of Rama. Hence the two women got religious sanction to give birth to the child and the divine endorsement sanctified their homoerotic relation which otherwise would have been vilified by the cis gendered population. As mentioned earlier it was only in the Bengali versions of Padma Purana that discuss the possibility of homoerotic relation of two women but within the safe precinct of religious, liturgical and mythological ratifications. The miraculous births of children sometimes to single mother,

single father, same sex copulation or supernatural births out of demonic and human forces can only be found in religious texts, mythological stories and sacred books. Hence I argue that same sex desires had been validated in the sanctifying texts and the story of Bhagiratha's birth to the two widows of King Dilipa was none other than the God's schema to continue the male lineage of Suryavansham where lord Rama would be born as an incarnation of Vishnu. Though camouflaged in heteropatriarchal family structure where a male king is facilitated to become a father to a posthumous child by the assistance of his two widow wives, the emotional chemistry and the erotic pleasure of the two wives have been authenticated by the divine force. The God-fearing religious scriptures or the prescriptive sacred books have time and again validated same-sex desires in different forms though for different end results. In other words same sex relation or homoeroticism have been religiously used as a means to achieve an end result that again valorizes male dominance and superiority in this case the continuation of the male lineage of the Suryavanshams. But what is fascinating is Bhagiratha, whose birth is accredited to have been a result of sexual intimacy of two women is responsible for bringing the sacred Ganges on the Earth. In other words, lesbian love that is vilified otherwise was already discussed in the sacred texts as possible forms of love exchanges. The joint suicide of the two lovers in Nandigram have opened before us many questions – the questions of identity, desire and multiplicity of taboos and often contradictory ideologies. It is the country of infinite desires and sexual identities where often a same-sex intimacy goes unnoticed and cross-sex eroticism vehemently stigmatised. As Madhavi Menon aptly describes Indian desires “that have escaped constraints”. Vatsyayana's Kamasutra while dictating sexual norms simultaneously mentions exceptions to all norms and rules as ‘desires that defy its own classification’. Indian desires are infinite and non-controllable by laws and policies. Menon exemplifies with the case of a lesbian woman sub-inspector who married her girlfriend in elaborate North Indian dresses and grandeur in a temple and their marriage was solemnized by Hindu rituals in the presence of family and friends. The same-sex marriage against ‘the law of nature’ took place peacefully with one of the partners being the representative of punitive law against carnal offence. Such variety of desires and variety of responses towards the evolving desires can only be witnessed in India. In the Nandigram suicide incident it was again the police who urged the family members of the deceased to claim the bodies for the last rites but the family denied to claim for reasons unknown. The bodies were burnt with the consent of the police authorities. The homophobic parents presumably loathed their decision to end lives for unauthorized and socially unsanctioned love. But I argue that India is a country with strong roots in same sex attraction and eroticism as evident in the religious and sacred texts and also displays array of infinite desires through lived experiences of gender non-conformists, sages, celibate married couples and human -God erotic attraction towards each other. This is the country that indulges in inconceivable mysticism and sensuousness and so called unnatural sexual arousals. These non-normative desires are in no way invalid just because they are not sanctioned by law or social codes. They do exist as truth as they are parts of lived experiences and realities of lives. Sucheta and Swapna wanted to live their realities but had to succumb to death as their family and society attempted to superimpose heteronormative realities on them. They wanted to be together in life but when denied union they unquestionably chose a different life – a life of immortal togetherness. As correctly interpreted by one of the interviewees, self-killing involves a moment of violence but even in that

climactic moment their words suggested love and concern for each other. Their denial to comply to the normative pressure of heterosexual union got manifested in their glad acceptance of death. As the eye witnesses claimed, both the girls carried an unexplainable contentment as reflected in the smile on their faces that speak of their life-long liberty from the social taboos.

Similar stories of pain, stigma, invisibility and unacceptance unfold as the five readers of the last letter by one of the suicide couples relate themselves to similar sufferings as universal victims of queerphobia. I would now like to argue through the narratives of the other protagonists of the documentary that irrespective of the locations, class, educational background and culture, the queer experiences remain unclaimed, unacknowledged and unidentified just like the dead bodies of Swapna and Sucheta. An analysis of the other stories in the documentary would bear testimonial to my proposition. Banani, aged 34 and a fashion designer by profession documents her story of pain and deprivation as a lesbian body. After her coming out/disclosure of gender orientation, her parents denied to even visit her and disowned her and set her free to make her own decisions. She was lawfully disintitiled from her inherited properties for fear of apprehended fraud as the presumed possessor of aberrative personality. As Barnali argues in the documentary her inclination or attraction towards another girl immediately criminalized her and she was othered from the hetero-normative family structure as a misfit. That is again because desires are always understood as heterosexual and anything deviant is considered unnatural and deemed to be punished. This punishment gets manifested both privately and publicly. Privately by honour-killing, provocative suicides, disowning and disavowal of children and severing legal ties with them and publicly by stigmatizing them and unacknowledging their desires. Barnali, Sucheta and Swapna are victims of both private and public indignation and hatred as they were denied right to existence and in the later case were not even claimants of last rites after their death and the society never helped by them to protect them. The legal system of the country had blindly followed the colonizers though with decreasing harshness but in spite of legal modifications, the inclination towards denial of variant and non-conforming sexual categories had been strong. As Madhavi Menon emphasises in her essay entitled 'Law':-

The criminal law (Amendment) Act of 2013, for instance, which has made the rape laws in India more Stringent, cannot even conceive of sexual activity as being anything other than heterosexual. Male victims of male rapists are not protected by the amended law and female perpetrators of sexual violence against women or men are even allowed to exist.

This explains the degree of precarity of the gender non-conformists and specially the same-sex female lovers who are systematically rendered invisible as same-sex female partners acutely challenge male superiority. Again quite interestingly the position of perpetrators and victims also determine a power equation with the victims portrayed always as weaker section and the perpetrators as the powerful. Acknowledging the women as perpetrators of another women and males as victims of homosexual rape disturbs the power question of male prowess and female vulnerability. Hence in spite of legal modifications with decreasing degree of harshness towards same-sex love, the non-binary population remains unprotected by law as the country's legal bodies consciously perpetuated heterosexuality and consequently made stringent laws only against

heterosexual rapes. Sucheta, Swapna and Barnali unfortunately were born in a transphobic and queerphobic country and acknowledging their existence also entails responsibility of sharing the social and cultural space with them and hence they are systematically othered. Alienating them from the created continuum of gender binary sometimes by forcing them into heteronormative sex or alliance and sometimes by completely distancing them from heteronormative family structure. Whatever cannot be caged or straightjacketed into the gender binaries have to be discarded. Whereas infinite desires and identities have been depicted in art, paintings and Indian mythological stories but accepting them as normal is a severe challenge specially after the imposition of Victorian morality on the Indian sub-continent. In keeping with their conservative outlook towards gender and sexuality, the British based their legal rulings on Manusmriti instead of Kamasutra as the former had prescribed punitive norms for non-procreative sex. Whereas Kamasutra was tolerant and rather encouraging of sexual varieties, manusmriti had prescribed specific punishments considering non-procreative, oral and same sex love as offences. The prescriptions of manusmriti and the stringent codifications of Victorian Morality made their way into the legal system framed by the colonizers with the ultimate deadly weapon of section 377. As Menon mentions; “If the Kamasutra had become the basis for the British Legal system in India, then we would be inhabiting a very different set of assumptions about sex, desire and sexuality.”

Swarup who claims himself a trans person and trans sexual narrates his story of internal pain and suffering when he longed to impersonate a woman since his childhood days but was considered an aberration in the family. He wished to undergo biological transformation being trapped in the wrong male body. Swarup was never heeded to and disregarding his psychic femaleness, Swarup was forcefully pigeonholed into a heterosexual marriage by his transphobic parents. His life was stuck between the contrapuntal pull of his biological maleness that socially justified his procreative marriage and his psychic femaleness that demanded complete emancipation from the enforced compromises and performativity. But as Swarup claims in the interview the family structure where he was forced into had only ended up baffling him about his balance between familial responsibilities as he also fathered a son and his desire to impersonate his strong feminine attributes and feel fulfilled. Countless lives of non-binary bodies remain confined and imprisoned into the enforced socially sanctioned family structure, some like Swarup are fortunate enough to bring his sorrows before the media and public visibility and some sacrifice themselves unquestionably out of internalized queerphobia.

Swarup was a case study in being an agent of both acceptance and revolt. He has accepted his parental in of getting trapped into his biologically empowered performative role of maleness with his consequent marriage resulting into procreation. But with his psychic sexuality overpowering his biological constraints, he courageously came out before his family and society. He and his family were interviewed on the journey of ‘un-becoming’ what the by birth gender has imposed on Swarup. This story of ‘un-becoming’ and external transformation can be understood with some theoretical knowledge on the fashioning of the self.

The study of the self and the consequent self-fashioning is not an independent factor but is also related to the environment in which identities are formed and nurtured. This identity formed as a part of socio-cultural

exchanges is not static, fixed, universal or standardized but always evolving, ever-growing and exposed to multiple influences. So there are several factors involved in the making of the identity and that remains unbounded by absolute norms and codifications. An example of a famous impersonator in the Marathi Theater will clarify this point in question. The impersonator named Manohar Singha was inducted in the role of Begum Barve in the play with the same title by Satish ALekar. While ALekar chose CHandrakant Kale as Barve by virtue of his 'slender figure and delicate features' that supposedly suits feminine attributes, Allana went a step further and experimented with the masculine and strongly built Manohar Singh in the feminine role of Begum Barve. This nontraditional casting invited critics to disapprove of the suitability of the selection of Singh in the role of Barve. As the story goes the character Barve was a man who wished to be a woman and the dichotomy between his real world of biological masculinity and the ideological or psychic world of femininity becomes the central plot. The story also involves two sets of participants one that of his real world of pain and sufferings and his imaginative world of escapism. His sufferings get doubled with the presence of a drunkard Shyamrao who exploits his feminine attributes by using him as a 'companion'. His other world of fantasy is co-inhabited with two characters Bawdekar and Jawdekar who get attracted towards his presumed feminine world and even end up in conjugal alliance with Bawdekar initiating the marriage between Barve and Jawdekar. The illusory marriage also results into illusory pregnancy of Barve but this internal pleasure of Barve of actually enacting womanhood is shattered with Shyamrao divulging the secret of Barve's biological masculinity. The rift created between Barve and Jawdekar collapses the world of fantasy and pushes them into the grim world of reality. But what is noteworthy here is the depiction of the shifting gender portrayed brilliantly by the masculine Manohar Singh who more aptly fulfilled the demand of the role of Barve who himself was trapped in the male body and played the role he longed to play, that of a woman. The masculinized feature of Singh and his inherent feminine grace perfectly matched the undefined and overlapping gender attributes exemplified by the character of Barve. Barve, as the director explains, oscillated between the biological confines of maleness and the idealized world of emancipation and liberty that came to him in the form of his Longings for enacting femininity. But the masculine Manohar Singh and his attempt to play the role with the required feminine grace aptly brought out the inner desire of a biological man to become a woman. This apparent shift in self-fashioning made the gender borders look quite porous and permeable to criss cross the traditional gender indicators. The apparently grotesque look of the male beneath the heavy mask and costume of a woman made the incongruity even more prominent for the viewers to get perplexed. But a deeper introspection beyond the set norms of presentability, strengthens the idea of in-betweenness of the human body that is capable of sustaining the illusory world of gender bender. The hypermasculine appearance of the actor in no way was a stumbling block in transcending the gender limits into a graceful exaggerated woman. In a similar way, the laundas of the launda nach, the chokras of the ALkaap dance, the female impersonators of lavni have always elicited applause from the audience and have many times seduced the viewers with their coquetry and grace. They have always succeeded in crushing the gender indicators and performativity. As artists these non-normative performers have always entertained and invited participants in their dream-like illusory world of enactment and artistic performance. But what they face beyond artistic confinement is only stigma and othering. My illustration of

Barve is used as a point of reference to emphasize on the powerlessness of the biological gender over the psychic gender. Swarup is a case in point. He had performed what his biological gender made him perform but resisted when his continuous enforced performativity clashed with his inner desire that outweighed the commands of family and society. Swarup used to take pleasure in dressing as a woman from his childhood days. A village resident growing in a homophobic environment, he never let his closeted feelings come out in public visibility. His society and parents too considered his early transvestism as a child's play and dismissed it a serious sexual orientation. Swarup was forced into heteronormative mould ignoring his quest of mind and body. He even accepted the burden of binary relations and dragged on the drudgery to satisfy the aspirations of his family. While his aspirations remain unfulfilled, he longed for ending his undesirable life everyday. As he says in the documentary; Suicide can never be one's fantasy as it involves the last degree of violence required to end one's life, but when life for anyone signifies living it for society and others then the only way to escape that enforced existence is to end the life of pain and suffering. Here Swarup, Sucheta, Swapna and a Barnali speak the universal language of pain meted out as a result of ignominy, social castration and severity from so called mainstream life. They are the victims of no external physical assault but acute mental and psychic assault and the pain of estrangement from family and society because of their gender orientation has left a deep scar on their mind. This figurative scar deepens further as there is no change in treatment towards them and hence no cure of the scar. The ways to get rid of this deepening wound are sometimes submission and sometimes non-compliance. Swarup initially was a victim of internalized homophobia and hence submitted to the institutional dictum of binary marriage. Having undergone the tumultuous inner dilemma of pain of compliance and freedom of non-compliance, Swarup chose to resist the set norms of family structure and came out of his closeted desires to express his reality for a better living. The result was unsatisfactory as his concretised otherness was now strongly disliked and stigmatized by his parents and family and hence Swarup's desire to end his life became stronger and stronger. His wife was trapped in the heterosexual lifestyle with a non-binary who could not meet the familial standards expected of a binary Masculine. The heterosexual woman and the trans-man forced into heterosexual marriage had to bear the brunt of unacknowledgement of queer identification of the biologically husband figure. His biological entrapment prevented him from leading a life of a free trans-man in a homophobic environment.

Swarup if he had to be classified under a sexual category considered himself as a trans-sexual lesbian. A transsexual because he disliked his biological body and longed for a woman's body and lesbian because he in his psychic womanhood never yearned for a man but always desired a woman as his loving partner. This queer identity of Swarup is quite striking and opens up a new outlook towards broadening and extensiveness of queer spectrum. The gender and sexuality categories are not limited to universal nomenclature of male and female but keeps evolving with the evolution of infinite desires. But having mentioned the sexual category or orientation of Swarup, it is imperative to mention that a queer analysis of Swarup's gender identification will not permit encouragement of describing his category namely 'transsexual lesbian' as he claims himself to be under the heterosexual compulsion of revealing a category to claim entitlement to the question of existence in the society. These sexual identities are porous and evolving to the extent of a

heterosexual and happily married man claiming to be a trans-person at some point of time in his journey of revelation of the self. This may not be the case with Swarup as he consistently felt the pressing urge of breaking through his biological shackles to inhabit the body and mind of a complete woman. But the beauty of queerness lies in the fact the infinite nature of these variety of identities cannot be circumscribed and pigeonholed into set categories. Any attempt to do so will defeat the purpose of richness and extensiveness of queer experience. As Bakshi mentions in his introduction to his book 'Queer studies', 'The only possible way to keep queering Queer Studies is to explore and expand its immeasurable potential to challenge and dismantle norms'. He adds 'The term 'queer' resists the practice of pigeonholing individuals based on their sexualities and encapsulates desires and sexual practices which elude definition or label, in fact, even language' Therefore a lesbian is as much a queer as an asexual or even a heterosexual who resists procreation post marriage. Hence the narratives of Swapna, Saucheta, Barnali and Swarup have to be collectively understood as encompassing the oppositional narratives that are strong and valid in their own ways to challenge any hetero-patriarchal narratives that have grown with the help of institutional patronages and sanctions. The illustration of Mohan Singh impersonating the role of the gracious Begum Barve best suits the porousness of queer desire. The manly appearance of Mohan Singh was no stumbling block in playing out the female with the requisite coquetry and grace and his impersonation elicited a good deal of appreciation from the audience. He in his queer style proved that the subtle slippage from a male to a female body is possible without a major transformation in the external appearance and without conforming to the set forms of gender indicators. In other words the essentialist notion of female performativity that can be only impersonated by an effeminate man is smashed by this stance of making a well-built masculine body perform a female role.

'Tar Cheye se onek aro' (More than a friend) is yet another documentary directed by Deboleena and produced by Sappho For Equality that posits queer friendly narrative through the fictional story of Ranja and Rupsa in the heart of urban Kolkata. While Ranja works in the capacity of a Professor in a leading college in Kolkata, Rupsa is a photographer cum journalist who is also featured in the movie, shooting for a documentary on society's know-how on queer relations. The story of the lesbian couples unfolds against the backdrop of the documented viewpoints of the general public on same-sex love. These interviewed people comprise the educated intelligentsia, middle class bourgeois "Bhodrolok Community" (Middle - Class Gentlemen) as well as the activists and lawyers. The narrative of Rupsha and Ranja resembles any other heteronormative story of love, care and emotional bond. Living together in the heart of Kolkata, Rupsha and Ranja even get their joint photo taken for framing the same like any newly wed couple. Quite unlike the village residents and lesbian couples, Swapna and Sucheta, these urban lovers had the self-confidence and independence to choose their partner of choice. This independence was self-earned by virtue of their fear-free minds and adequate knowledge of historical testimonials and credentials of same sex eroticism specially ingrained in the mythological roots of Indian sub-continent. More than the free-flowing narrative of this queer couple, what I found interesting in this documentary is the diversified opinions of the people interviewed on homosexuality. The story of Ranja and Rupsa can be weighed against the counter balancing viewpoints of the common crowd. While on one hand, there were statements marking indignation and hatred

toward same - sex desires, on the other hand' some historicised the trajectory of homoeroticism with reference to notable authors, thinkers and philosophers who had been known for their non- binary gender orientation. The activists and lawyers spoke of the monstrous nature of section 377 that violated the fundamental rights of the constituency. On the whole, the movie quite interestingly created an atmosphere of passive debate among the law breakers and the law keepers. As discussed earlier in my chapter queerness is anything that challenges sanctioned social norms, hence the law - breakers refer to the category who are queer enough to defy the hegemonic societal norms and the law keepers blindly adhere to what has been passed across generations unquestionably. In academia this dichotomy between the law-keepers and the law- breakers in the context of challenging the institutionally sanctioned norms had been an issue of debate and discussions. Here we need to understand the fact that the insiders at times had joined the bandwagon in expressing their desires of being counted in the 'mainstream' socio- cultural and legal practices followed by society at large. One of them being the desire to live in a prototypical heteronormative family structure that is based on the idea of binary and difference and not on sameness. This justifies why among the gays and the lesbian couples, one is invariably feminine and the other masculine which again is derivative of heterosexual coupledness. Homosexuality in a way then in trying to model the heteronormative family pattern and kinship tends to move towards homonormativity. Discussing the perils of replication strategy by the community, Bakshi writes "...homonormativity is extended to homonationalism -the white Euro- American strategy of using the excuse of protecting queer lives in order to promote Islamophobia, with the ulterior political motive of consolidating the image of the 'bad Muslim' Other." This has consequently resulted into a glaring polarization between the radical queers who deny to be incorporated into seemingly beneficial state benefits as well as the kinship structure and the assimilative queer subjects who would partake of the favorable legal and social changes that apparently appear to be queer-friendly safeguarding their prerogatives. The replication of hetero-normative family structure and nuptial union of the binary couple, by the sexually non-conforming segment, is aimed at inclusivity and acceptance. The desire to conform to the sanctioned family patterns springs from an unexpressed internalized homophobia and a subdued re-assurance of social recognition and visibility that comes with such conformity. To substantiate this point I would like to cite an example of kinship formation in the Hijra Community as exemplified by Bakshi in his chapter entitled ' Queer Kinship, Dissident Citizenship and Homonationalism '. The formation of socio-emotional and cultural bondage in the *Hijra Kholi* is quite interestingly modeled on the biological mother - child relation of care and nurture. The young and the new Hijra is welcomed by the senior Hijra through a ritualistic ceremony of feeding the Dudh -Beti (milk child) with blood instead of milk of the Dudh-mata (Milk mother) reminiscing the birth of a child in the clan and the new addition is fostered by establishing a blood line parallel to the the biological blood line of the Hijra. This way the new Hijra enters a new kinship that sustains through the rest of the life. Though claiming to be queer, the relationship is based on the heteronormative emotional bond between biological mother and daughter that again strengthens procreation. Ranja and Rupsha live together challenging the binary norms yet get quite trapped in the traditional family structure through their desire to be photographed like a happy couple quite much in the fashion of a happily married heterosexual couple. One of them being a photographer cum journalist and quite outgoing resembles

a typical manly outwardness and the other is into teaching that according to the tradition of gender performativity is considered very feminine and sanctioned by nobility that again is a marker of feminine attributes. Their bond is again derivative of the heteronormative coupledom. The propensity to imitate the male-female love symbiosis is explained by Dasgupta while discussing the array of sexual preferences in the gay dating sites like Planet Romeo, Grindr or Gaydar. The effeminate gay bodies express special interest in the bodies with prominent masculine attributes. But on the contrary these sites are effeminophobic in that the profiles of the shemales or the girly queer men are shunned and ignored as it is strongly believed that they are 'too transgressive' and their hyperfemininity might put the entire gay community down. This further problematizes the equation where being 'transgressive' is considered non-normative and unsettles the masculine gay desire for another manly gay. The masculine gays by being hypermasculine satisfies the normative criteria of gayness wherein a manly gay desires another masculine gay or a typical male body. An emasculated male body remains undesired by the gay male who shuns the former as a stigma to the otherwise accepted community. As Dasgupta writes and I quote " Effeminate men, both on cyberspace and in physical space, threaten to unmask the normativity that many gay men build around themselves. Going by similar understanding of homonormativity in the gay world, where it is accepted that a cis gender gay body yearns for another masculine male, a pair of hyperfeminine lesbian couple can then be considered co-existing in the normative equation. A cis gender lesbian longing for similar sexual orientation and another female body can then be considered within the homonormative purview. But the question remains what then is too transgressive or subversive. Challenging the binary love structure of male -female and existing as same sex couples in the pattern of male- male and female - female attraction with both partners performing homogeneous gender roles completely crushing the binary love equation or same - sex couples with butch and femme attributes where one is invariably performing a masculine role and the other showcasing feminine attributes. Bakshi maintains that inspite of the transgressive nature of non- binary relations, these partnerships mostly dwell on the heteronormative family model. Even within the dating sites and among the homogeneous gay couple where both the partners possess manly attitude and masculine behavioral traits there are labels like 'top','bottom', 'more top' and 'more bottom' based on the replicated sexual roles of the heterosexual couples where one is invariably at the authorial top and the other at the receiving bottom. Bakshi too talks about the impossibility of transgressing the dominant model of family structure while illustrating different case studies of non-normative relations. He cites from Don Kulick's research on Brazilian travestis who were feminine men and were attracted towards 'maridos', a typical male who is most sought after by the travestis. These maridos had prominent muscular bodies with no interest in other men and are more desirable when they had previous experiences of copulating with women. These female yet biologically male travestis and the typical males or maridos are exact prototypes of female-male heterosexual couples with the only exception of a matriarchal rule in their community as the travestis financially supported the maridos and hence enjoyed power and social superiority over their male partners. The lesbian partnership is somewhat different and perhaps to some extent is capable of disrupting the dominate binary structure as the male counterpart is completely absent from their partnership,a reason why lesbianism was not much discussed or even viewed as a serious sexual orientation. As Ranjita Biswas argues

in her essay, 'The Lesbian Standpoint' that the gay- lesbian activists and lawyers have mostly grounded their agendas of equality and justice for alternative sexualities on claims of 'human rights' where the entire human race is considered as a political category who must not be othered on the basis of non- normative sexuality. She further argues that the challenge lies in making space for the differential preferences like the 'not-so-good humans and the subhumans.' In other words humanity too is defined by one's ability to represent, express, rationalize through scientific and political consciousness. A 'human' is also an upper- caste, class, white citizen as understood by the dominant structure. The lesbian's position is further problematized as she does not fit into 'human' mould 'as she is not male, not rationale (by virtue of her sexuality) and not political (by virtue of the illegal status of her pathological sexuality) The specificity of lesbian experiences and sufferings are lost within the macrocosm of particularly structured humanity. Whereas identity politics is shaped on the basis of uniqueness and individuation that is rendered obscure within the generalized model of 'humanity'. Again on the contrary, fighting for establishing an identity is almost like broadening the purview of an already dominant identity model. In doing so the newly established identity is weighed or understood within the 'naturalized workings of the dominant order' (heterosexual order). In other words the dominant order pleases to make some space for the minorities within the already established hegemonic structure. Such kind of fight for inclusivity and assimilation within the sanctioned institution only champions the dominant as original, normative as natural and the alternatives as somewhat variant. In Butler's words, the oppositional heterosexual attraction perpetuated through reinforcement of performative practices (men attracted towards females and vice versa) across generation, render any other forms of sexuality aberrative. The question then is does the counter- normative always have to be circumscribed by the so called normative and exist as an extensive spectrum of dominant model. The question become all the more pronounced for the lesbian subjects who had different identities from the heterosexual males and females, as well as the homosexual gays. Though the LGBTQ+ Community shelter the lesbianism within its ambit, but ideologically lesbianism completely differed from the gays because of their assumed hostility against masculinity and allied more with the heterosexual women. The later feminists who realized the inadequacies of the feminist movement and its agendas, brought into the purview of discussion, emphasis on women's personal life and sexual preferences in addition to political and social Equality. These lesbian feminists urged the heterosexual women to forsake male partners both as sexual mate and social protectors. This came to be called 'political lesbianism' wherein women revolted against the hegemonic male superiority by erasing masculinity from their ideological ambit. Hence more than sexual pleasure with other women, the purpose of lesbianism found meaning in creating an oppression-free space by getting rid of the male partners altogether. Going by this understanding, an attempt to include lesbian identity within the framework of the hegemonic order will certainly have ideological and political fallacies. When heterosexual women who fought for Equality with the men folks of the society found it inconceivable to incorporate lesbian Standpoints in their agendas, as they threatened the heterosexual structure that the feminists were a part of, lesbianism stood apart to champion their priorities and prerogatives.

In the above discussion, I have attempted to counter-balance the lesbian narratives both at the rural and the urban setting attempting to examine the intersectionality between non-elitist and the elitist lesbians in

different socio-cultural settings. These narratives are representative of the differentially situated lived experiences of the lesbian partners. Cases of joint lesbian suicides are quite rampant among the non English speaking and downtrodden lesbian couples like Swapna and Sucheta. They are academically and linguistically incapable to express their desires in a highly homophobic environment of hetero-normative family and kinship. The only escape route from the forced heterosexuality seemed to be suicide as a silent form of severe resistance against the heterosexual hegemony. Instance of joint suicide of lesbian partners appears in the second documentary too that I have examined but again within the unprivileged class , in this case the niece of the cleaning maid who worked in Ranja and Rupsa's house. The loss of two lives is contrasted with the positivity that surrounds Rupsa and Ranja's relationship. Again it is more of an inward realization of discovery of joy that comes with the togetherness of the couple than societal validation. The painful narration of the suicide of the maid's niece reported by the maid before Ranja's mother awakens her to the consequence of resistance that transforms her inwardly to accept the partnership and coupledness of her daughter with her girlfriend. The documentary features a queer affirmative space welcoming Ranja and Rupsa within the family structure. Though the mention of a definitive structure problematizes the fluidity of relationship that is always in the process. But the debate between the radical and the assimilative thinkers will continue to influence research on gay-lesbian and queer studies until the dominant -minority disparity persists. I would end the chapter here with a few unanswered questions. Are the lesbian experiences as reflection of the self capable of restructuring the dominant heteropatriarchal order? Will the lesbians continue to glorify the complete absence of toxic masculinity from their political framework? Can the lesbian relationships initiate radical thinking that would actively help in revamping the established symbiosis? Can the heterosexual women inspired by the lesbian emancipation attempt to move towards an oppression free, dominance free, independent space? These remain unanswered so far, but these non-normative experiences taken together can create a strong footing against the hegemonic order so as to make adequate space for 'non-normative' desires to survive with glory.

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