Heteronormativity in Asia is constructed around the claim that all its agents work towards the creation or preservation of harmonious Asian families. Yet, there is enormous violence involved in the perpetuation of this myth. This article is based on the life stories of widows/divorced women, sex workers and lesbians in India and Indonesia. I focus on the factors that produce domestic violence and make it intelligible within the normative patterns of Indian and Indonesian families. The emphasis is on the mechanisms, the passionate aesthetics, that inform the particular construction of heteronormativity in these countries. These aesthetics are commonly classified as ‘private’ as they are played out within the domestic unit.

The life stories collected in this project provide rich examples of the effects these often-invisible norms produce in the lives of those who are positioned both within and outside the institution of normative sex. The passionate aesthetics displayed in these life stories demonstrate how heteronormativity is continuously produced, reproduced and also how change is possible, by displacement, partial adherence, fusion, subversion or downright rejection of dominant norms. Not all heterosexual practices or lifestyles have a similar status; there are hegemonic and subordinate forms of heterosexuality. Violence, as I will explore here, is an intrinsic part of the passionate aesthetics that underlie heteronormativity.

Passionate aesthetics within the ‘harmonious’ Asian family
The passionate aesthetics by which the present day heterosexual patriarchal family in Asia is represented as the ideal of a harmonious family - the repository of marital bliss composed of dutiful, virtuous wives and responsible husbands - are multiple. The glorification of this family model hides its underlying symbolic and physical violence. The passionate aesthetics explored here range from epistemological concerns (insistence on the binaries that inform heteronormativity), to rape and shame. For women in India and Indonesia, the normative family model is based on pre-marital virginity, chastity during marriage, and motherhood. Self-sacrifice and dependence upon males is glorified for women. These norms are anchored in religious values. The Indian ‘divine family’ should not be ruptured by divorce; in Indonesia too, marriage, particularly a woman’s sexual obligation to her husband, is seen as a service to God. In both countries, divorced women are heavily stigmatized; this stigma even extends to organizations that attempt to empower those women. Ideals of purity and self-sacrifice in India are often enforced by in-laws, in Indonesia, these ideals are more directly tied to social control over sexual behaviour by husbands. The dominant Asian family is not only heterosexual, it is also supposed to remain within caste lines (India) or religious systems. The family is not always the safe haven, the model of harmonious life, that its proponents would like it to be. It can, in fact, be a very violent place, particularly for young girls. The two major studies on the Indian family system do not mention incest, other than referring to it as a category of marriage avoidance. In Indonesia too, talking of incest is taboo. Our narrators suffer the pain, guilt and shame in silence. They initially tried to hide these traumatic experiences and to paint a rosy picture of their childhood. Instead of blaming the perpetrators or those who should know most of our narrators have internalized the shame and guilt, thus attesting to the power of the symbolic violence of heteronormativity. Many feel it is their own fault that their ‘loving’ parents behaved so callously towards them.

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all of our narrators were activists and even the activists structure their private lives along at least some major aspects of the ‘heterosexual matrix’. Pre-marital virginity remains important in India; for instance, in Madhya Pradesh on 30 June 2009, virginity tests were conducted before a chromoblot test conducted mass wedding of rural women. Activists protested, but it is unlikely they made a dent in the underlying enforcement of virginity. The threat of polygamy with its accompanying deceit and jealousy in Indonesia, and arranged marriages and dowry issues in Indian families, are all supported by patriarchal values. Male superiority runs deep. Sometimes it is built on overt forms of violence, at other times the symbolic violence of one kind or another. Mental or material superiority is accepted as normal by the women of the house. Women are supposed to adjust to the habits of their husbands. Fathers or husbands are the obvious sources of power, but if a vacuum arises then brothers and sons are quick to assume their roles in the patriarchal household hierarchy. The imposition and maintenance of patriarchal values is one of the major expressions of the passionate aesthetics of heteronormativity. These values include that men are superior, earn more money and have more power.

Two imbricating processes form the basis of the passionate aesthetics of ‘uttering’; expulsion and repulsion. While expulsion has to do with the construction of physical, material and social barriers and taboos, with invisibilization and silencing, repulsion refers to the fears, desires and fantasies that are involved within the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’. Not only is a person expelled from the boundaries of ‘normality’, but all elements that may be sympathetic to that constructed ‘abjected’ person also have to be removed from the consciousness of those within the fold of heteronormativity and those outside it. Often, the excluded others internalize the disgust, hatred and fear expressed by the ‘normal’ population. Precisely because the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’ are so closely intertwined, the process of its forced separation entails a lot of violence.

Conclusion

In this study we investigated the passionate aesthetics of heteronormative relationships in India and Indonesia. The class/caste divide and religion largely determine the internalization of a patriarchal culture of morality and silence imposed on our narrators. We analysed the extent of the physical and symbolic violence of heteronormativity. The forms of passionate aesthetics discussed above range from epistemological considerations (the stress on binaries) to marital arrangements and internalized shame and guilt.

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

Heteronormativity presents the heterosexual family as the ultimate goal in life for women, where they will attain the bliss of a ‘normal’, ‘harmonious’ family life. However, in reality, the family is often not the safe haven promised to them. Once cracks become apparent, women are supposed to adjust, emotionally, intellectually and financially. Passive aesthetics involve various modes of control, abjection and violence, rendering the non-heterosexually-married space for women highly hostile and financially dangerous. However, there is danger within the ‘normal’ heterosexual family too. The success of these aesthetics lies in the way women, even in non-heterosexual relationships, aspire to its values, while women who have experienced various forms of violence themselves continue to live, or at least live with, the perpetrators of that violence. Perceiving violence against women as a private issue may have the effect of making structural factors that fuel this violence invisible. Heteronormativity is not limited to the bedroom but extends its tentacles into courtrooms, boardrooms and into all locations in which societal institutions operate.

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