

The enforcement of heteronormativity in India and Indonesia

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.

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IN THIS DISCUSSION the untenability of the distinction between the public and the private sphere becomes clear since heteronormativity is informed by social constructs and institutions. The research project on which this article (and the original book chapter) is based was conducted in the framework of the Kartini Asia Network.² The fieldwork was implemented between 2005 and 2007 and explored the ways in which passionate aesthetics are being constructed in India and Indonesia. I first discuss the concepts used in this research and then list nine forms of different passionate aesthetics that emerged from the project.

Concepts used: passionate aesthetics and heteronormativity

Passionate aesthetics are defined as the institutions, dynamics, motivations, codes of behaviour and (re)presentation, as well as the subjectivities and identities that together make up the complex structure of desires, erotic attractions, sexual relations, kinship and partnership patterns that are salient in a given context. Passionate aesthetics thus underlie particular regimes of heteronormativity and of sexual subcultures. One of the effects of passionate aesthetics is maintaining the internal cohesion of heteronormativity; in constant processes of expulsion and repulsion, a category of abject others is created while the inner core group is silenced or seduced into subjection.

Heteronormativity informs the normativity of daily life, including institutions, laws and regulations that impact the sexual and reproductive lives of members of society as well as the moral imperatives that influence people's personal lives. Heteronormativity refers to practices, norms governing those practices, institutions that uphold them and effects produced by those norms within individuals. These effects can be seen in behaviours and feelings as well as in the aspirations for the future that the narrators nourish for themselves and their children.

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.³ 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.⁴ 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,⁵ 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 shield them, 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.

The core of heteronormativity is formed by sexual difference - the assumption that humanity is neatly and 'naturally' divided into biological females and biological males who demonstrate feminine and masculine behaviours linked to their biological identities. A second binary is the split between 'normal' and 'abnormal'. The supposed naturalness of these divisions supports the hierarchy between sexes and genders.

A third, less commonly noted, characteristic is that the 'abnormal' category is further subdivided into various types of abjection, while their shared origin has become blurred. The three categories of marginalized women we researched are similarly constructed as 'abject' by their heteronormative societies, while they are each set apart as distinct categories. This makes it difficult to see through the barriers that keep them apart from each other. They do not see each other as allies but as differently abjected others and constantly weigh their relative distance from the socially valued 'normal'. Their point of reference remains the heterosexual patriarchal family, not the commonality of their positions as falling outside its boundaries. The widows and sex workers do not blame the heteronormative construct for their current state of abjection, but rather their own bad luck. The lesbian activists see through the myth, but not

Training of Village women on Dowry, Domestic Violence and Child Marriage, India. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons License, courtesy of the 'Center for Women's Global Leadership' on flickr.



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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'.⁶

Pre-marital virginity remains important in India; for instance, in Madhya Pradesh on 30 June 2009, virginity tests were conducted before a government-conducted mass wedding of rural women. Activists protested, but it is unlikely they made a dent in the underlying enforcement of virginity. The pressure to remain a virgin until the marriage date leads to early marriages, particularly for girls in poor households who cannot afford to attend secondary school.

The 1974 Indonesian marriage law recognizes polygyny, although it sets certain conditions. A man can only marry four wives and the consent of the first wife is needed. However, many men either do not present a letter of consent to the registrar or marry in front of a religious official only, the so-called *kawin siri* or unregistered marriage. Needless to say, the new wife can be divorced without any difficulty by the husband. Children born in these unions cannot get a birth certificate and often find it difficult to enrol in schools (for which a valid birth certificate is needed). First wives are often unaware of subsequent marriages. The children in polygynous marriages suffer too as they experience the injustice done to their mothers.

Traditionally, Indian women live with their in-laws after marriage. Sons are dependent on their mothers, and daughters-in-law are often treated badly. The problems often centre around money. Girls have to provide a dowry upon marriage. There are many conflicts about these dowries, sometimes even ending in the murder of the young wife. The standard narrative of a dowry death is harassment of the daughter-in-law by a group of her affinal kin (comprising mother-in-law, husband, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, etc.). In the litigation that may follow, the conjugal family invariably takes the plea that the death was either due to an accident in the kitchen or suicide following mental illness (commonly subsumed under the clinical term 'depression').

Even where there is no mention of direct physical or sexual violence between spouses, marital relations in the heterosexual families of our narrators were not always cordial and warm. There was often a lack of communication or even downright deceit. Money matters are a source of much strife within the Asian households discussed here. In India and in Indonesia, men are supposed to be the breadwinners and derive social standing and power within the household if they fulfil that role well. In Indonesia, this is even formally stated in the marriage law. In popular understanding, women provide sex to their husbands, and men give their wives money. The housewife-breadwinner ideology does not hold up in poor households, where both women and men have to work, yet in anticipation of a man's breadwinner role, boys receive better education than their sisters if there is not enough money to provide schooling for all siblings.

Negotiating a dowry, Indonesia. Image reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy of 'Mikaku' on flickr. Image used solely to illustrate article. No implied meaning is attached to the actual event portrayed.

Although the characteristics of Indian and Indonesian heterosexual orthodox families differ in some aspects, both constructs are suffused with patriarchal values. The threat of polygyny 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 some kind of male mental or intellectual superiority is accepted as natural 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 'othering': 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 'normalcy', 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.

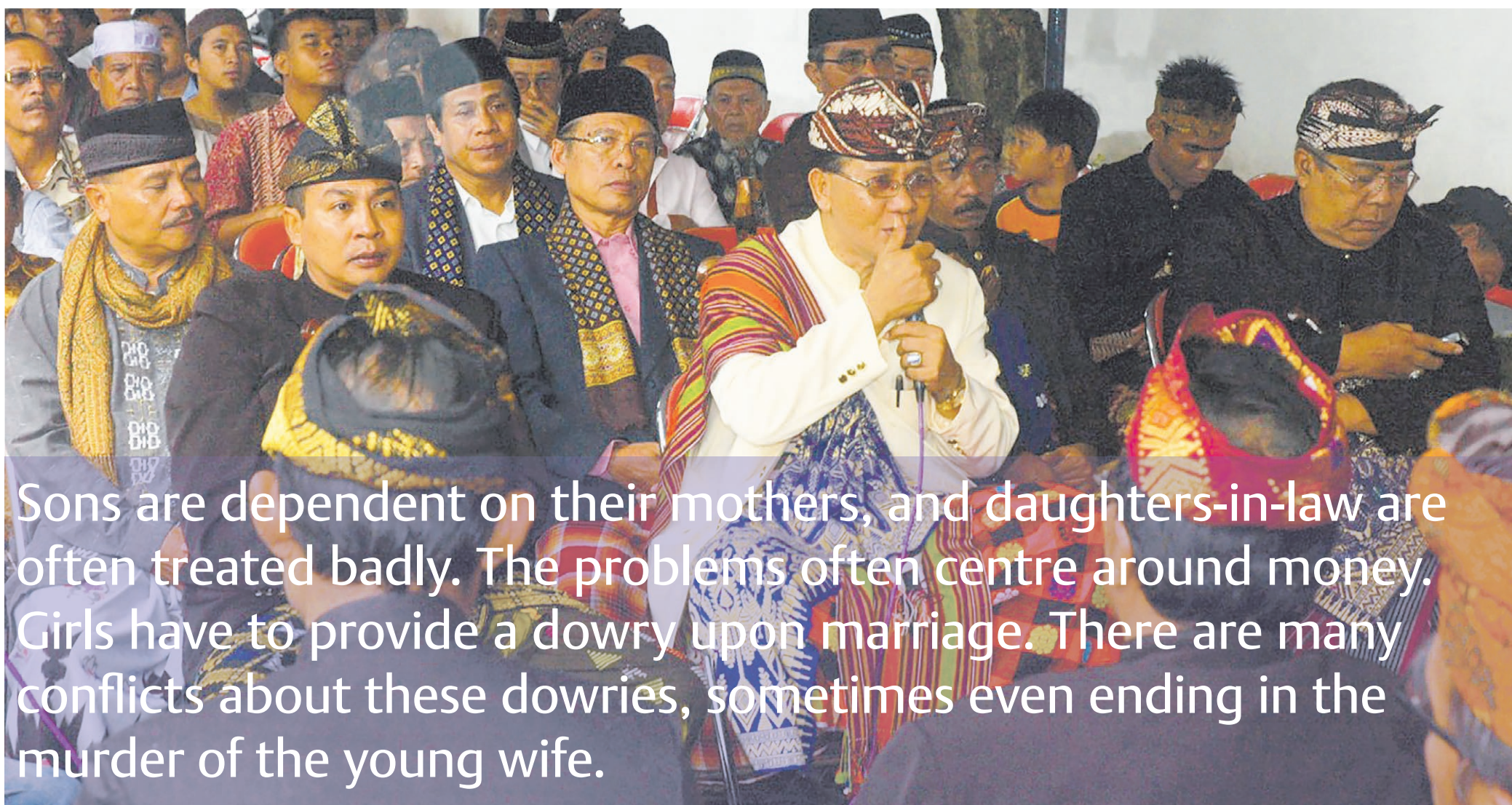
Heteronormativity presents the heterosexual family as the ultimate goal in life for women, where they will attain the bliss of a 'normal', 'harmonious' family life. However, in reality, the family is often not the safe haven promised to them. Once cracks become apparent, women are supposed to adjust, emotionally, intellectually and financially. Passionate aesthetics involve various modes of control, abjection and violence, rendering the non-heterosexually-married space for women highly unattractive or even 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 love, 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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Notes

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- 2 www.kartiniasia.org
- 3 See Wieringa, S.E. 2012. 'Passionate Aesthetics and Symbolic Subversion: Heteronormativity in India and Indonesia', in *Asian Studies Review*, 36(4):515-530. Special issue: 'Queer Asian subjects: transgressive sexualities and heteronormative meanings'; Wieringa, S.E. 2014. (forthcoming) *Passionate aesthetics and symbolic subversion; heteronormativity in India and Indonesia*, Eastbourne and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press.
- 4 In India, the lesbian group Sappho for Equality, in collaboration with the Kartini Asia Network, documented 92 kinds of violence that lesbian women experience, ranging from abuse and ridicule to murder or double suicide. See Ghosh, S. 2011. *Vio-Map: Documenting and mapping violence and rights violations taking place in lives of sexually marginalized women*, Kolkata: Sappho for Equality.
- 5 Patel, T. (ed.) 2005. *The Family in India, Structure and Practice*. New Delhi: Sage; Uberoi, P. (ed.) 1994. *Family, kinship and Marriage in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 6 Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble; Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge.



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