Outside/rs 2022

Making Space at the Queer Intersections of Sex and Gender

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Care and Loyalty in the Closet:
A review of scholarship on sexual identity disclosure in queer
South Asian women

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Abstract

This paper highlights a gap in scholarship on personal and family relationships of British queer South Asian women and queer women of colour. It enables fields of study within queer theory, family sociology and intimate relationships to move beyond Western normative frames when looking at queer individuals and their relationships. Existing research on queer people of colour is limited and, where present, rarely focuses on diasporic British queer South Asian women. This paper looks at the diasporic context and highlights why the South Asian family unit should not be categorised as homophobic. It looks at how notions of 'coming out' and 'the closet' are Westernised and Eurocentric. It also looks at the use of 'the closet' as a shield emanating from a place of care for the family and self. This paper also presents queer women of colour as individuals who are moving beyond a binary of being queer and ostracised from family or as pretending to be straight to remain in their family, asking if this can also be the case for queer South Asians. Finally, throughout this paper, the discussion touches on the concept of 'chosen families' and how it may apply to queer South Asian women.

Keywords: Queer; Family; South Asian; Relationships

Existing research on queer issues has predominantly been focused on white individuals. When research does focus on queer people of colour, it rarely focuses on those from a South Asian background, and on the rare occasions it does focus on queer South Asians, it is mainly focused on gay men (Basi and Qureshi, 2018; Bhugra, 1997; Han, 2007; Jaspal, 2014; Jaspal, 2020; McKeown *et al.*, 2010; Mishra, 2020). Similarly, work on family, relationships, kinship, and intimacy has generally focused on white families. This results in normalising what is happening in white

families as a universal truth for all types of families, while overlooking the realities of non-white and minority families.

Weston (1991) and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan's (2001) work on 'chosen families' highlighted a new way to look at intimate and personal relationships of queer individuals whose families had disowned them. Chosen families are seen as a replacement for families once an individual has disclosed their sexuality or 'come out of the closet', as they adopt other queer people into their social circle. However, more recent work by Reczek and Bosley-Smith (2022) suggests an alternative look at the relationships that queer people have with their parents and the extent they go to in order to keep and maintain these bonds. However, although there is some attention paid to race and ethnicity in the work, as it is focuses on the US context, it is silent on the South Asian experience. There is thus good cause for a focus on the personal life and experience of intimacy for minoritised South Asian queer women living in the diaspora in the UK.

This paper explores the debates around the lives of diasporic South Asian women living in the UK, taking a narrower focus on queer South Asian women while considering how their multiple identities impact their personal and intimate relationships. Due to the lack of research on queer south Asian women it focuses more broadly on queer Asians in some parts, which highlights even further the need for more research to focus on queer British South Asian women.

South Asian Heritage and 'Culture Clash' in the UK

The clash of cultures concept proposes that first-generation migrants lived primarily enclosed within a social world of other migrants. The so-called 'second generation', spending their childhoods mainly in the UK, had to move between a wider variety of social arenas of home and school, organised around different cultural conventions. Whilst the critical sources on this are largely dated (e.g., Saifullah Khan, 1979; Watson, 1977), the same trope lives on in work hypothesising how immigrant

parents face the burden of passing their customs, traditions, and values down to their children, who are thus exposed to different and conflicting values and beliefs from the western world, producing an inescapable inner conflict (Dasgupta, 1998).

However, the presumption of the clash of cultures has been vigorously critiqued by many scholars (Ahmad, 2006; Alexander, 2006; Sian and Dhamoon, 2020) as pathologising South Asian culture and viewing it through the lens of Western norms. The implication is that young people of South Asian heritage need to be saved from their rigid, honour-bound parents by being brought into the supposedly liberal Western society. A view which can be read as reinforcing Western superiority and contributing to the othering of individuals, and which does not acknowledge identity's complex, intricate, and intertwined nature.

By the 1990s, an alternative understanding had developed based on the linguistic concept of code-switching. Ballard and Banks (1994) critique the clash of cultures concept and offer an alternative vision of the second generation enjoying creative movements between cultures. They state that South Asian youth are skilled at switching seamlessly between the different cultures they are exposed to inside and outside their homes. This makes them adept at successfully navigating in and out of various social circles and situations (Ballard and Banks, 1994, p. 34).

Using bilingual acts of code-switching as a metaphor for bicultural competencies can open cultures as hybridising. For example, Qureshi (2015) goes beyond code-switching to the linguistic concept of code-meshing, whereby dialect forms are seen to break through into standard languages and are seen as an inherent characteristic of dialect speakers in multiglossic situations. Therefore, trying to separate the two languages is impossible. Extending this argument, she shows that the home is not hermetically sealed from the cultures of schools and peer groups, as school peer group cultures are remade by the cultures and languages from home.

Family and home are two important sources of support and refuge for South Asian people in the diaspora. Families can serve as a protective mechanism against racial oppression faced from the outside world – what hooks (1990) calls 'homeplace' and acknowledges as a site of resistance to racism. At the same time, the supposedly 'strong family values' of South Asian minorities have come to be deployed as political emblems of the community, and these expectations of upholding 'strong family values' lie particularly on women and their sexual demeanour (Werbner, Yuval-Davis and Werbner, 1999).

Thus, work on code-switching/code-meshing, and the creative cultural translations made by young people in the diaspora should not impede the deeply felt claims that families may make upon them, as sources of succour and in policing intimate life. It is also important to acknowledge that we are coming full circle. Although individuals may deftly merge and move across their identities and cultures, the home may still need to be a safe space from the racist world (Gardner and Shukur, 1994). This suggests that British South Asians are skilled at sculpting their personal and home lives with the influences of the outside world.

Gender and all its troubles

Although the South Asian diaspora is in itself quite diverse based on religion, region, family traditions and cultures and a whole host of other factors (Couture-Carron, 2020), they do have shared experiences of racism and code-switching/code-meshing. The socialisation of gender roles happens from a very early age. For diasporic South Asian women, it is tied in with concepts of shame and honour which may be infused in every aspect of one's life (Khan, Saleem and Lowe, 2018)– even if these concepts have engendered controversial scholarship.

For instance, the concept of 'izzat' is described as "…encouraging individuals to think about the impact of their actions on the family" (Mucina, 2018, p. 433). Seemingly, South Asian femininities are bound by all the things a woman should not be doing or be seen doing, including

drinking, smoking, taking drugs, having sex, dating, and engaging in intimate premarital relationships (Bradby, 2007; Couture-Carron, 2020; Meetoo and Mirza, 2007). Izzat can be seen as tied to male pride and the ability of the male members of a family unit to control the female members. Furthermore, the ideal of izzat in terms of gendered expectations plays into the idea that women are the custodians for ethnic identity production and maintenance, especially in a diasporic context (Werbner, Yuval-Davis and Werbner, 1999). However, it is important to note that debate and discussions of izzat and honour often highlight extreme examples which serve to 'other' South Asian people. Honour exists in all cultures; is honour-based violence not just a racialised word for domestic abuse? In Western society, honour can be seen in acts of slut-shaming to reinforce "the value placed on a woman's ability to appear virginal and pure" (Meharchand, 2016, p. 5), as well as in acts of violence against women.

This discussion is developed further by Grewal (2013), Abu-Lughod (2011) and Ahmad (2006). They draw on the discourse of honour as demarcating civilised Western culture from the culture of the uncivilised other. At the same time, such conventional readings of honour as a patriarchal male discourse have rightly been critiqued as orientalising. In contrast, Bradby (2007) shows that South Asian diasporic women may be creating narratives of izzat that focus on religious, educational, and professional achievements, which overshadow the negatives to a certain extent. By creatively reworking traditional narratives, young women who want to participate in activities that the culture deems 'dishonourable' could find ways to get around it by, for example, dressing modestly and respecting the elders. This example shows that ideas about izzat may remain significant, but we cannot take the local meanings around izzat for granted, and we should not assume that classic male narratives of izzat will always hold power.

Some may get around these strict restrictions placed on them by lying or altering the truth they tell their family. This follows on and develops themes introduced in the earlier discussion around hybridity

and code-switching/code-meshing. Handa (2003) talks about young South Asian girls in Canada who do not fit in with either the stereotype of the typical teenagers or with cultural expectations. Lying to parents was seen to be normal to maintain a positive identity as a 'good' South Asian girl. Dishonesty was thus seen as the only way to achieve some sort of freedom. Telling parents the truth meant potentially damaging their reputation as a good desi girl; even though some of the participants did not feel they were 'bad', they knew that, in the eyes of their parents, they were un-desi as they were acting in ways that desi girls are not supposed to.

Lying can also lead to living a double life, arguably a lie writ large. Bhopal (1997) spoke to women who had moved out of their parental homes and in with their boyfriends, but as this was not acceptable, they did not tell their parents and maintained a façade of being single. When studying South Asian women in the USA, Bacchus (2017) found that some parents did not want their daughters to move out for university as they were worried that they would not be able to control their daughter anymore. Those that did manage to move out made sure to conceal their activities from their parents so as to not jeopardise their freedom and lose their trust and respect. This shows another side of the hybridity that South Asian women use to navigate their complex lives.

For queer people of colour, these concepts of lying, concealing, and leading a double life run parallel to the idea of 'the closet'. Just as individuals conceal actions and behaviours from their parents by lying to achieve some sense of freedom (Handa, 2003), coming out of the closet can mean a loss of trust and freedom (Mishra, 2020). Studies on lying and concealment in (presumably heterosexual) South Asian women propose an exciting way to look at and understand the lives of queer South Asian women. Specifically, if/how they conceal, sacrifice, and negotiate their own identities in an environment and family context which might view queer identities as rebellious behaviour and as a "White people's thing" (Tremble, Schneider and Appathurai, 1989).

These descriptions may prove resonant in the context of the personal and intimate lives of queer South Asian women, especially as diasporic women are depicted as emblems for tradition. The discussion around lying and concealing parts of their lives may open up an avenue to creating chosen families where queer South Asian women can be their true authentic selves otherwise hidden from their families of origin.

Personal life (Being a queer Asian)

Kumashiro (1999) states that queer individuals of colour experience double the oppression based on their marginalised identities as they are a minority presence in mainstream queer spaces (Kumashiro, 1999, p. 491). For queer people of colour, coming out can harm not only their relationship with their families, but also with the wider ethnic community. Akanke (1994), who identifies as a Black Jamaican woman, presents this complex interlinking of sexual and racial identities in her decision not to come out:

> It would be foolhardy of me to turn my back on the opportunity of receiving and giving my support to the Black community as I cannot deny that being amongst, and spending time with, people whom I identify on so many levels and with whom shared commonalities offer temporary escape from racism, far outweighs any desire to 'openly' assert my sexuality.

(Akanke, 1994, p. 112-113).

Additionally, queer individuals of colour coming out can increase the chances of being rejected and discriminated against, possibly leaving them vulnerable to violence (Szymanski and Hilton, 2021). Once rejected from their family, queer women of colour may face rejection from the broader queer community. This rejection can come in the form of racism and othering, which can leave them feeling like outsiders (Alimahomed, 2010), having their ethnic identity marginalised (Conerly, 1996) and being treated as "...strange, exotic creatures" (Greene, 1996, p. 132). Furthermore, their noticeable difference in terms of race and ethnicity can "...be a source of distrust and disgust" (Nair, 2008, p. 8).

Tremble, Schneider and Appathurai (1989) state that queer youth of colour experience conflict regarding coming out between themselves, their parents, their ethnic culture and the culture in which they are brought up (Tremble, Schneider and Appathurai, 1989, p. 256). Not disclosing their sexual identity may be a decision queer South Asian women make based on self-protection and to maintain access to their family support system. However, this work, reminiscent of the clash of cultures debates, carries a pathological view of minority cultures as more homophobic than the supposedly progressive majority cultures, an assumption that has been problematised.

The literature talks about home as a sacred and traditional place, praised in diasporas in terms of the homeland, which is cast as the epitome of heterosexuality in contrast with a sexually deviant and queer diaspora (Gopinath, 2005)(Gopinath, 2005). At the more intimate level of the birth family, queer ethnic minority individuals may, similarly, experience home as the epitome of heterosexuality and family values (Fortier, 2003) because, like most people, they are born into heterosexual families living in a heterosexual home environment (Fortier, 2001).

For white queer individuals, coming out and leaving home may be a feasible option; for them, home is a destination they need to reach (Fortier, 2003; Sinfield, 1996). The idea of leaving home, finding a group of others in the same position, and creating a queer utopia can be inaccessible to racially minoritised queer people due to the otherness they may face from the white queer community. There are instances of racism in the queer community where the preference is for white individuals, which strengthens the notion and presents an image that being queer means being white (Basi and Qureshi, 2018; Han, 2007). This, however, may make the idea of creating chosen families for queer South Asian individuals difficult.

In some South Asian contexts, it has been argued that the closet is not seen as a death sentence the way it is in the Western world (Sedgwick, 2008). Rather, the closet can be felt to be a means of protecting yourself and those around you. For example, Mishra (2020) outlines that in an

Indian family, one is expected to behave in an approved heterosexual way to gain your family's love and avoid hurting or disappointing them. Even imagined scenarios of pain and hurt that the family may go through may be enough to cause instances of guilt in queer South Asian individuals. Therefore, not coming out can be a means to protect yourself and the collective family unit as well as enacting care for your loved ones. This creates a push and pull between wanting to live your truth and wanting to care for those closest to you. The closet can thus be experienced as a shield that protects your family from shame and hurt, which builds on the concepts of izzat and cultural differences and the creative and hybrid ways that are employed to overcome the issues that are faced by queer South Asians.

Relatedly, Horton (2018) looks at the idea of silence as a connection between queerness and kinship. Many of the young gay people and lesbians that Horton interviewed in India stated that they have not come out because they do not wish to ruin the family's name. Staying in silence and in the closet is an act of care for the family and their social standing as individuals. Horton confirms that the home can be a safe place of love and care that can quickly turn into a hostile and violent environment if one deviates from the norm.

Although the concept of queerness is not new to regions in South Asia, the global language used to describe alternative sexual identities, such as 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'bisexual', may be challenging to translate into Hindi, Urdu, or Panjabi (Cohen, 2005; Horton, 2018; Khanna, 2011). Queerness may be considered a "white disease" (Bhugra, 1997; Dave, 2010; Dave, 2011), as being queer is seemingly seen as incompatible with an ethnic identity.

However, there is a need to critique the notion that Asian families are incredibly hostile and unaccepting of queer individuals. The diasporic presumptions concerning homophobia and abuse towards queer identities in the ancestral countries may not be a matter of fact. Studies conducted in other Asian countries can provide an insight into how families have incorporated queer people that moves beyond the 'coming

out' or 'in the closet' dichotomy. Coleman and Chou (2013) discuss 'coming home', a Chinese term describing the alternative to coming out. They state this is when a queer individual takes their partner home without acknowledging their same-sex relationship for what it is and integrates them into the family network. Coming home keeps individuals in the closet, as they are silenced to protect and preserve the heteronormative family and its position in society (Wong, 2007). In a South Asian context, research in India (Achar and Gopal, 2021) has shown that parents of queer individuals do know about their child's sexuality, but it isn't a topic of discussion within the family, in order to maintain familial stability. Just as South Asian diasporic youth have seamlessly combined the different cultures and identities they are exposed to, queer individuals in Asian countries are approaching being queer in creative ways. Future research on the personal and intimate lives of British queer South Asian women should focus on how the knowledge of their sexuality influences the relationship they have with their families and how they navigate and develop the relationships they have with people they may consider their chosen family.

Family relationships

Family can be an essential and empowering support network and place of comfort, but it can also be a place of oppression. In their article, Alvarez and Scharp (2021) touch on things queer people from both white and minority ethnic backgrounds consider before coming out to their parents. These include:

i) The anticipated family reaction.

ii) The reputation of the family.

iii) The cultural background the family comes from.

iv) The closeness of the family.

Fear of causing disappointment and hurt were also factors in not wanting to reveal one's sexuality to one's parents (Haxhe and D'Amore, 2014). Acceptance can take time for families as they need to adjust to their understanding of what a family means (Pralat, 2016), and recalibrate expectations to account for the shift from an understanding of the conventional heteronormative life to an understanding of queer life (Alvarez and Scharp, 2021).

Some individuals choose not to come out due to a perceived duty of care towards their parents and the fear of hurting them. This is captured in a vignette by Basi and Qureshi (2018) where a depressed mother was seen questioning what she did wrong in the upbringing of her son that he turned out gay – seeing his friend's mother hurting deeply made one participant strengthen his decision to never come out to his parents. Here, not coming out can be seen as an act of care towards the parents.

Bhugra (1997) describes how, for gay South Asian men in the UK, their parents are usually the last to be told. The primary reason for this is a fear of causing problems for parents after coming out, such as embarrassment, shock, self-blame, and blaming the culture of the adopted nation for corrupting their children. Tremble, Schneider and Appathurai (1989) state that queer children of immigrants may become 'invisible' and exclude themselves from the family, community, and cultural events in order to avoid bringing shame on the family.

Morales (1989) states that some families may accept their children coming out but not discuss the matter, while others may be more supportive. Not everyone who comes out faces adverse reactions from their family, nor are they always positive. Fry, Monro and Smith (2020) looked at three British South Asian queer women and found that one had come out to her parents, but still felt like she was living a double life as she concealed her identity from her extended family. They also describe the ordeal of one individual who came out after her mother's death, as she felt she had nothing to lose. This, however, resulted in changed relationships with her extended family, as she was not meeting their expectations of how a woman should behave. Although she was not

disowned, she did feel that she could not turn to them in times of need and utilise the support network a family provides. This highlights the idea of silence as an act of care towards the family. The closet is thus used as a shield by the participant in order to protect the reputation of her parents.

Jaspal (2020) looks at the reaction of parents with gay sons. These reactions have included:

i) Seeing coming out as a challenge to their sense of self and belonging.

ii) Thinking they have failed their parental duty.

iii) Thinking if the knowledge of their child's sexuality is known to the wider community, it will be weaponised for use against them and their family.

iv) Withdrawing from the wider community to avoid social stigma.

v) The paranoia that everyone already knows.

vi) Choosing to ignore and hide the child's sexuality and to look for a suitable partner for heterosexual marriage.

It is important to note that these reactions cannot be generalised and are from parents who have had a son come out to them. They may not be translated to a daughter coming out due to the different cultural expectations surrounding the nature and significance of parent-child relationships with sons and daughters and the specific gender roles that are placed on their off-springs. There is also evidence that the rejection of a queer child by ethnic minority parents is related to sociocultural pressures (Richter, Lindahl and Malik, 2017). Other factors which can make it hard to come out in an ethnic family can be traditional family values (Hailey, Burton and Arscott, 2020), deteriorating mental health and forced psychiatric treatment (Bhugra, 1997), even the idea of being rejected can lead to negative behaviours such as self-harm or drug use

(O'Neill, Gilea and Fellenger, 2020). For women of colour, family is a key source of support and coming out could result in jeopardising this (Greene, 1996). In contrast, Gorman-Murray (2008) looks at positive stories for queer individuals coming out to their families. Over time, parents can start to recognise their child as an individual and not as a threat to them, leading to a more supportive and substantial relationship.

Siblings on the other hand, do not have the same authority and social standing in the family as the parents do. For siblings, there is not a generational difference to account for in terms of wider societal acceptance and acknowledgement of queer issues. Siblings may care less about their societal place and may be more open-minded. Haxhe and D'Amore (2014) look at the role of siblings in the coming out process. They recruited 44 gay and lesbian Belgians and found that over half of their participants had come out to their siblings before coming out to their parents. As the relationship is not hierarchical, it can be more open, trusting, and friendly.

It is also important to recognise that most of what has been discussed here are negative depictions of queer people of colour coming out to their parents, this is not always the case, but it is useful in the context of this paper to show why coming out may be difficult for some people. It is also important to highlight that these negative reactions do not automatically mean that the parents in question are homophobic. Work by Reczek and Bosley-Smith (2022) looks at the contact that adult children keep with their parents in cases where there is tremendous strain in the relationship due to their sexual identity. They highlight how the relationship is maintained due to a sense of social obligation about the nature of family, along with the imperative of compulsory kinship.

Moving beyond chosen and given families

In keeping with the recurring theme of hybridity, the final section looks at how queer people create communities and personal ties that go beyond the immediate family, which has been touched on throughout this paper.

In her book, Weston (1991) looks closely at what chosen families meant for queer people in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1980s. She situates chosen families as the opposite of families based on blood ties, creating a stark comparison between gay and straight families (Weston, 1991, p. 108). Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) provide a similar discussion of same-sex intimacies for people in the UK in the mid-1990s. They provide accounts of how queer people get creative with their intimate relationships. Chosen families can encompass current and ex-partners, friends, and same-sex parenting (Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991). Chosen families are seen by Hull and Ortyl (2019) as being complementary to blood families rather than competing against them. They also do not compensate for the lack of blood families. This sentiment is also reiterated in Reczek and Bosley-Smith (2022) as they look at the difficulties that queer people go through to maintain their sacred bond with their parents.

The key research on queer people's chosen families has not been ethnically diverse. However, it is possible to track how scholarship on queer people's chosen families has moved beyond the USA and the UK. For instance, in a study in Poland, Mizielińska and Stasińska (2018) look at families of choice. Polish queer people maintain relationships with their families of origin as they are a means of refuge, safety, security, as discussed above, and potential acceptance. When looking at queer Latin Americans, Acosta (2014) found that a parent's acceptance of a partner is crucial, as integration into the family is essential, as family provides a stabilising force. The same can be true for South Asians.

As discussed in previous sections, South Asian diasporic youth seem to have a hybrid approach to the multiple cultural heritages they embody across different settings. Literature from Asian countries shows that queer individuals are creative in meshing their homes and queer identities. Could this hybrid approach also translate to their families of origin and chosen families? Conventionally, there are social expectations on how friends and family behave and each person's distinct roles depending on whether they are family or friends. However, in practice,

these expectations are not always as clear-cut as this, and friendships can become burdensome and compulsory (Pahl and Spencer, 2004). Thus, the level of commitment one gives to family or friends is a fusion based on the nature of the bond they share. This can give way to the concept of personal communities, which was built on by Pahl and Spencer (2004), who outline that "...personal communities are the closest we can get to postmodern community life" (Pahl and Spencer, 2004, p. 205). Citing and building on Calhoun (1998) they state that these personal communities are a model of relating and social belonging. This can be a helpful lens when looking at the relationships that queer South Asian women may have with their friends and family, as there may not be a clear cut between 'chosen' and 'given', but a fusion of the two. Personal communities can allow us to see the different relationships that are significant to people at specific times (Pahl and Spencer, 2010) and how the balance of friends and family members play into this intimate community that queer South Asian women may create for themselves.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the gap in the literature on queer British South Asian women and their personal lives and emphasised the need to move beyond the normative white lens when looking at queer individuals and their relationships. It has shown how British South Asian youth can be skilled at creating a hybrid of the cultures and values of the home and the world outside the home. South Asian women seem to be bound by concepts of shame and honour within their south Asian community. However, they do not let these concepts restrict them as they work on achieving their freedoms by presenting an altered version of their truth to their parents.

This leads on to the lives of queer people of colour, for whom the concepts of lying runs parallel to the closet. For them, this paper argues, the closet can be a shield, a way of protecting yourself and those around you from the wider society and cultural community one is a part of. It

highlights how coming out is imbued with a Western normativity which, due to the complex traditional and cultural values that are instilled in them, does not fully apply to the lives of queer people of colour. The inability to come out to one's family is not necessarily, therefore, due to a perception of homophobia. Although this paper draws on literature focused on negative aspects of coming out to parents of colour, it is hoped that it provides an alternative framework for understanding why it may be difficult for people of colour to come out to their families. Finally, this paper touches on the concept of chosen families and states that it may be a useful lens to apply when looking at queer South Asian women's relationships.

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