

# The Absent

## Exploring non-heteronormative desire

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### Introduction

In the 1960s and 70s hundreds, if not thousands of young women\* were recruited from India to work as nurses in West Germany (cp. Goel 2023). The narratives I collected about them<sup>1</sup> are full of arranged marriages, of husbands from India joining their wives in Germany and families being founded. Non-Indian partners are mentioned far less, in particular when they were pre-marital. Almost nobody talks about desire, and even less about same-sex desire. This could be interpreted by the dominant society as yet another example of a gender conservative migrant community.

But why should we assume that these gaps in the narratives result from an absence of non-heteronormative practices in the lives of the nurses? It is highly unlikely, that among all these young women\* all were adhering to conservative gender roles and none were same-sex desiring. Thus, I started to search actively for deviations from the norm.

In this article I will explore what is absent in the narratives. I will discuss examples of non-heteronormative desire, offer methodological thoughts about how this can be accessed, and epistemological considerations why this is important, and can also be intrusive.

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1 Since the late 1990s I have conducted ethnographic research among the nurses and their families. I interviewed them, their husbands, their children, their colleagues, and social workers. I did participant observation at community events and hang out with them and their families. I analysed publications and films produced by the community, and did research in state and church archives.

## Making Space for queer Narratives

Judith Butler understands gender as a norm, which “operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization” (2004: 41). It “governs the social intelligibility of action” (*ibid.*) and “allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social” (2004: 42). Butler (1990: 23) furthermore argues that for gender to be intelligible there needs to be a coherence of sex, gender and desire. We understand only those genders, which conform sufficiently to the existing heteronormative order in a particular context.

Furthermore, we become subjects by conforming to this order and by dismissing other possible gender identifications (1993: 3). Thus, the abject is created, i.e. the constitutive outside of the subject (*ibid.*). “The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject [...]”. “(*Ibid.*) The abject threatens the norm (*ibid.*) and must thus be dismissed.

Gayatri Gopinath, focussing on the South Asian diaspora, writes about that which is dismissed, which she calls impossible desire (2007: 15–25). She argues that national imaginaries make a queer diaspora unimaginable (11) and threatening. Thus, anything queer needs to be erased from the dominant historical narratives, which leaves queer archives necessarily fractured and fragmented (22). Similarly, José Muñoz argues that due to persecution queer narratives are absent (2019: 67).

By referring to impossibility Gopinath, however, does not only refer to the unthinkability of queerness, but also to the utopian demand for the impossible (2007: 19–20). Like Butler she wants to make the unimaginable intelligible (187) and thus makes an intervention into dominant narratives. She sets out to challenge the heteronormative configurations of nation and diaspora (16) by “restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora” (11). She also aims to decenter dominant configurations of queerness coming from the global North (*ibid.*).

My article builds on this understanding of the norm, the intelligible and the abject. It does not aim to out queer migrants, but rather to make them thinkable and to counter dominant narratives about backward migrants.

## Malayali nurses in Germany

The recruitment of the young Christian women\* from the South Indian state Kerala in the 1960s and 1970s happened within the gender oppressive structures of the nursing profession, of the church and of the West German and Malayali<sup>2</sup> societies (cp. Goel 2023).

In India nursing was linked to stigma (cp. George 2005: 45–48): The menial work involved was considered “dirty”. Due to the bodily contact with strangers and the relative independence of the nurses they were considered “loose women”, i.e. women whose sexuality was not sufficiently controlled. As Yuval-Davis (1995) argues the protection and control of women’s sexuality is a central part of nation building since women are required to reproduce the nation both biologically, through bearing the right children, and culturally. Gopinath (2007: 9) similarly argues that “it is through women’s bodies that the borders and boundaries of communal identities are formed”.

Most of the nurses conformed to the Malayali gender order and after some time had arranged marriages with Malayali men. This, however, led to a further rupture of the gender order. Since the husbands did not receive work permits in West Germany for the first few years, the nurses earned the family income, while the husbands did the housework. Thus, they could perform neither normative femininity nor masculinity (cp. Goel 2019).

The framework of the recruitment of the nurses thus inevitably went along with a questioning of the nurses’ gender performance. If they did not show enough effort to conform to the gender order, they had to fear social exclusion and marital conflict. It was thus expedient for them – as for their husbands and other members of the communities – to distance themselves in their narratives from anything challenging the order.

## Staying in the opaque

One way to keep the threatening abject at bay, is to pretend it does not exist. I will explore this through a vignette<sup>3</sup>:

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2 The language spoken in Kerala is Malayalam and the people are called Malayalis.

3 I construct the vignettes from the empirical material I have collected.

Prince went to school in India. In his puberty he felt attracted to boys and was very confused about this. His mother noticed that he was troubled and sent him to the school psychologist, who was also a priest. Prince assumes that the psychologist guessed his same-sex desire, even though they did not talk directly about it. He further assumes that the psychologist told his parents that he went through a phase, which could happen in puberty and will go away when he marries.

Prince later joined his parents in Germany to study. He told them that he was earning money modelling for magazines and showed these to his parents. He also told them that he is participating in competitions. They knew he was living together with a male friend, who attended all family events. Because he knew about his parents' rejection of homosexuality, Prince however did not explicitly out himself. When he was in his mid-twenties his father started pressuring him to marry. In a quarrel Prince then outed himself explicitly. He thought his parents knew, because of the gay magazines and competitions and his partner. But his father was furious and for the next year did not communicate with Prince.

Before I analyse this vignette, I first need to turn to the issue of anonymisation. As I am writing about desire, which in the heteronormative order has to be dismissed, I need to take extra trouble in anonymising those, who shared their stories with me. Complete anonymisation is not possible, in particular in the case of such a small migrant group as the Malayalis in Germany. Thus, I change as many attributes of my research partners as possible without changing the essence of the vignette to make it difficult for persons from the community to identify the people written about.

The vignette shows that same-sex desire was at the same time something unintelligible to the parents and the psychologist – they could not really imagine that Prince was gay – and something threatening, which could exist and thus had to be kept at a distance. It seems that the parents had hoped it will vanish, if they decided not to see it. Thus, as long as Prince did not explicitly say that he was gay, they were not only able to ignore his gay modelling and competing, but also the nature of his relationship with his flatmate. However, in the moment Prince spoke about it, it could no longer be ignored, the abject entered the realm of the sayable, could be seen also by others and thus threatened the order of things. The catastrophe, which they seem to have feared all along, had happened, and the reaction had to be fierce. In a

conversation with me Prince wondered, whether he should not have told his father. He could have continued his openly gay everyday life and at the same time kept good relations with his parents.

Prince was open to me, because he knew me for a long time and had seen that I write about queer topics in a suitable manner. Thus, he renewed our acquaintance cautiously, slowly opening further and always checking how I reacted.

While Prince wished to be accepted as an openly gay son, the second vignette shows that others were fine without this explicit acceptance:

From his social media account I suspected that Cyril, whose family I knew for a long time, was gay. I met his white German boyfriend Dirk at an event of Cyril's family. Cyril's father, like Prince's, was known for making homophobic comments. Nonetheless, Dirk told me that he was accepted friendly in the family context, even when they were travelling together in India and obviously slept in one bed. Dirk explained to me that he and Cyril did not need to show their affection, hold hands or kiss publicly. Cyril's father was okay with them and just did not want to talk about it. Dirk disliked that friends of the family kept on teasing Cyril's father about his son.

At the event I had approached Dirk, who had not met me before, and talked without restraint about the challenges produced by the homophobia of Cyril's father. He replied in the same unrestraint manner. Like Prince had done for a long time, Dirk and Cyril left their sexual orientation in the family context opaque<sup>4</sup> and thus made it livable. Cyril's father could welcome Dirk without being forced to acknowledge the existence of the threatening object. Like Prince, Dirk and Cyril also Jency was very much a part of a queer scene and out in most contexts. But in contrast to the men, she avoided attending Malayali events and if she had to go, took care not to out herself. She thus tried to prevent homophobic repercussions by her parents. Because she had read an article about me in her favourite lesbian magazine and had already met me once before, she contacted me and was open to tell me her story.

These three stories show three different ways of dealing with the hetero-normative framework in the Malayali communities: Prince wanted to be out

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4 Édouard Glissant develops the concept of opacity and claims a right to opacity. I thank Imad Gebrayel, who introduced the concept to me.

and regretted it, Dirk was fine with staying in the opaque and Jency hid her sexuality against her wish to avoid problems. In each case not talking about their sexuality gave their parents and the communities the possibility of ignoring their challenge to the heteronormative order and thus kept the latter intact.

## Providing a legitimate story

Another way to keep the heteronormative order intact is to normalise the supposed deviations from the norm by providing a legitimate explanation. I encountered this in the context of pre-marital relationships of the nurses as the following vignette shows:

The older sister of his mother had told Chris that his mother had wanted to marry in Germany, most probably a white German man. But this had been prevented by the family. Thus, Chris was convinced, that his mother had had a boyfriend. But she denied this. She said they were just friends and stressed that she had always conformed to the rules.

When Chris told me this story, I was not surprised. I knew his mother and had already heard the rumour. Some of her friends confirmed it in interviews. Later I also interviewed her. Since her husband was present, I did not ask her about her supposed boyfriend. But she mentioned his name on her own. She talked of him warmly, saying he was her German language coach and had helped her with many things before she was married. She also told me, how she had decided to get married in India and how she had organised this through her family.

Without either of us referring to the rumours, Chris' mother provided me with a counter story to them. In her story everything she did was within the rules. Now one could ask, which story is true. One can, however, also question whether there is a true story. It seems very likely that there was somebody, who was close to Chris' mother. Maybe she wanted to marry him as her sister claimed. Maybe he was just a friend as she said. Maybe it was even more complicated.

Pre-marital relationships of the nurses were one topic of my interview with the social worker Jaya. She told me that these led to conflicts when hus-

bands got to know of them. They would use this knowledge to blame their wives whenever there was a disagreement. Pre-marital relationships confirmed the image of the “loose women”. To avoid the repercussions of the stigma, the nurses needed to convince others that they had stayed within the normative order. In this framework there was no way to legitimise pre-marital desire, even less so when unsuitable partners were involved. Thus, the relationship had to be retold in a legitimate way. This is most probably what Chris’ mother was doing, and maybe also what she remembered.

To access such multi-layered stories a deep immersion in the field, an attentiveness to all kind of stories and their pursuit is necessary.

## Uncovering stories

While there were occasions, in which pre-marital heterosexual relationships of the nurses were mentioned or could be construed from the occurrence of love marriages, same-sex desire among the nurses was completely absent in my material. Since I found this very unlikely, I spoke about it at a workshop about Asian nurses. Sosamma, a former social worker confirmed – most probably for the first time – that they had existed. Thus, in my following interview with the social worker Jaya I explicitly asked her about non-normative desire:

Jaya told me there were pre-marital relationships with men, both with Indians and with Germans. Even between priests and nuns. And there were pregnancies and abortions and children, who were given to a children’s home. But she had never talked about this in the community as these were issues of professional confidentiality.

When I explicitly asked her about lesbian relationships, Jaya told me about a divorce case she was involved in: A nurse had brought her brother to Germany by arranging his marriage to her girlfriend. The brother was not able to deal with this situation. And also for Jaya it was difficult to understand what was happening. She also had heard about a case of suicide, which seemed to be related to same-sex desire. And she had heard gossip about relationships among nuns. Whenever she was talking about desire outside the norm in the context of the church, Jaya asked me to switch of the recorder.

For Jaya, like for most Malayali migrants, pre-marital and same-sex desire were so much part of what needed to be dismissed, that they were not part of the stories she regularly told. While heterosexual deviations from the norm could be imagined as deviations, same-sex desire was not intelligible. It could not be explained with the words available and thus was covered in the memory. Even decades later it was not easy for Jaya to talk about it.

Furthermore, in particular those deviations, which challenged the Church doctrine, were difficult to voice for Jaya. Her repeated request to stop the recorder can be understood as an effort to avoid the documentation of that which should not exist.

Since the abject desire is not only absent in the narratives but also hidden in the memory, I am only able to uncover these stories because I am actively looking for them and ask direct questions. I am following traces, looking for ephemeral evidence (cp. Muñoz 2019: 65) and using the right to speculate, when so much is covered (cp. Binder/Gammerl 2023).

## Gossip

But speculation must be dealt with cautiously as another vignette shows:

Reena told me that Lily's daughter had had an arranged marriage with a man from Kerala. But soon they separated, and people claimed that Lily's daughter is lesbian. Reena had also heard that Lily's daughter had tried to get her husband deported, arguing that it was a forced marriage.

When much later I interviewed Lily, she started on her own to talk about the divorce of her daughter and that people said she was lesbian. Lily denied this and emphasised that her daughter was now in a happy relationship with a man and was distressed about the gossip. She said her daughter had told her bridegroom before the wedding, that she would become intimate with him only in case the relationship developed in a way she felt comfortable, and since it did not, she separated.

As before, I cannot tell the truth from these stories. But obviously they develop around issues, which disturb the gender order. Something went wrong with the heterosexual marriage, which had seemed to conform to the norm. In the gossip this disruption was explained by finding fault with the wife. The

mother on the other hand provided an almost legitimate explanation, which while deviating from normative ideas of marriage stays within the heterosexual norm. Absent in the gossip and Lily's explanation, but part of Reena's account, was a questioning of the arranged marriage itself, of the norm of marriage and of the attempts to deport the unwanted husband by recurring to the law. Some of it might have been on Lily's mind, but it was nothing she talked about to me.

## Making Space for the non-heteronormative

In the course of my research I also did participant observation at a family weekend of adult children of the nurses. Before I went there the first time, one of the participants told me that it was a gender conservative group and I should be careful addressing issues of sexuality and queerness. This resonated with my own prejudices since the group consisted mainly of married, heterosexual couples with children. However, as I was looking for that which was not talked about, I decided to mention what was supposedly unmentionable. In my fieldnotes<sup>5</sup> I wrote:

“At the end [of my presentation] I announce a provocation and talk about homosexuality. All are very open and we talk about it. One of them says, it is a question of religion. Another resists this interpretation. I mediate and she thanks me for that. Stories of how their parents deal with homosexuality are being told, in particular in Cologne<sup>6</sup>, where this is often a topic. [...]

PS: After I outed myself, they applauded. It was weird being clapped for in this manner.”

My prejudice and that of the person, who had warned me, proved wrong. Sexuality was a topic to be talked about openly in this group. A few years later they organised a workshop about sexual harassment of children, in which one of the participants outed herself as a survivor. In talking openly about sexuality they consciously differed from their parents. The latter's

5 I am translating from my German fieldnotes and anonymise them.

6 The city of Cologne is known for its vibrant gay scene.

heteronormative order could and should be challenged. The gender norm had shifted. The clapping after my outing, however, showed that despite this same-sex desire still was an other, something which was not part of their everyday.

## Methodological conclusions

Non-heteronormative desire exists, even if it is absent in the narratives of the field. It can be accessed by the researcher, once s\_he can imagine its existence and gains the trust of her\* interlocutors. It is absent in the narratives of the Malayali communities, because the abject challenges the norm and thus has to be dismissed. It is not intelligible and thus lacks words to be spoken about. Once non-heteronormative desire is talked of, it becomes threatening and can face violent rejection. Thus, keeping it in the opaque is a strategy to live the impossible.

This opacity in the everyday should not be destroyed by a researcher. In no case individual persons should be outed without their consent. Thus, there can be many cases in which researchers should not attempt to search for and uncover non-heteronormative desire.

But this does not imply that non-heteronormative desire should be absent in the analysis. Researchers should be aware of the gap in their material and its consequences. They should write about it, even if a reviewer – as I experienced once – says that what is absent in the material should not be written about. Researchers should not reproduce the image of the heteronormative migrant, only because they are not able to access the stories, which deviate from this.

If researchers want to explore non-heteronormative desire, they do not only need to know how heteronormativity works in general, but also how it functions within the specific communities, how these are positioned in the society, what their major conflicts are, etc. Researchers need to reflect their own positionality towards the field in terms of the heteronormative orders, postcolonial orders, etc. If they want their research partners to be open to them, they need to be transparent about their positionality. Doing that can help in gaining trust.

Trust is the basis on which narratives can be collected. Their collection requires furthermore an openness to the field, curiosity, empathy and pa-

tience. Stories have to be noticed, paths followed and combinations made. Gopinath (2007: 21) recommends applying different reading strategies to make non-heteronormative practices intelligible. Binder and Gammerl (2023) encourage speculation as a queer method. Researchers need to be daring and ask what is not to be spoken about. At the same time they need to permanently assess whether this frankness could do harm to the research partners. If this could be the case, they need to refrain from it. In the presentation of the research careful anonymisation as well as the acceptance that there are things, which cannot be brought to the public, are basic requirements. The research partners have a right to opacity. At the same time they have a right that normative stories about migrants are challenged.

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