Articulating Intimacies from the Margins: An Exploratory Study on Intimacies of Queer Persons in Their Romantic Relationships

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Declaration

I, Shruti Chakravarty, hereby declare that this dissertation titled 'Articulating Intimacies from the Margins: An Exploratory Study on Intimacies of Queer Persons in Their Romantic Relationships' is the outcome of my own study undertaken under the guidance of Prof. Shubhada Maitra, Dean, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. It has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, or certificate of this University or of any other institute or university. I have duly acknowledged all the sources used by me in the preparation of this dissertation.

6th October 2020

Shruti Chakravarty

Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation/thesis titled 'Articulating Intimacies from the Margins: An Exploratory Study on Intimacies of Queer Persons in Their Romantic Relationships' is the record of the original work done by Shruti Chakravarty under my guidance and supervision. The results of the research presented in this dissertation have not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, or certificate of this University or any other institute or university.

6th October 2020 (signature)

Shubhada Maitra, Ph.D
Professor and Dean,
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To my critters,
Tequila
Chomchom
Phataka

Abstract

This study captures and visibilises intimacies of queer persons assigned female at birth (AFAB) in their romantic relationships. The study explores how queer persons define, express and navigate intimacies in a society where the rules of intimacy are heterosexual and cis-gender. This is a qualitative, phenomenological study, employing a queer-feminist standpoint epistemology and a power-marginalization lens to explore queer intimacies. Intimacies are embedded in an unequal social system of gender-sexuality and this study attempted to highlight narratives from the location of the oppressed. My own locations over fifteen years as a queer AFAB person (butch lesbian, cis-woman), a queer-feminist activist and a queer affirmative mental health practitioner have guided the entire research process.

The study is Bombay-based. The invitation to participate in the study was circulated in queer networks known to me. Ten queer AFAB persons who identified cis-gender, non-binary gender, gender-queer and agender were interviewed using an open-ended interview guide. Participants were between the ages of twenty-nine to forty-seven years. Seven of them described their experiences of a relationship they are currently in and three spoke of past relationships. All participants were from Hindu, savarna, English-educated and middle and upper-middle class backgrounds, a reflection of my own social locations and access to queer spaces.

Findings of the study throw light on how queer intimacies are done in newer or different ways from social norms of heterosexuality and cis-genderism. The popular assumption that queer people replicate or aspire to a heterosexual man-woman model of love is an incorrect one. Queer people have often resisted and subverted the norms thereby opening up newer possibilities on how intimacies can be understood and studied. Findings reveal that queer participants found their romantic relationships to be affirming of their queer selves. Being able to be their real selves was not an experience that was common to queer people. They often had to erase, self-censor or hide parts of themselves in order to keep safe, in most spaces they occupied. Therefore, romantic relationships as well as queer

friendships, queer political and/or queer community spaces were experienced as intimate because they offered authenticity and safety.

Queer intimacies were explored across four stages of a romantic relationship. Conceptualising intimacy through stages offered an in-depth exploration into the ever-present struggle with social norms that exists while finding, building, sustaining or ending intimacies as queer people. Findings showed that queer couples relied on their own values to guide their relationship and affirm their togetherness, rather than on existing social norms. The meanings of intimacy and how to organise everyday life with each other was based on egalitarian values rather than gendered scripts of masculinity and femininity. If romantic relationships ended it was often due to social pressure and stigma. Often, even after the romantic relationship was over, close bonds with exes continued and chosen families were created.

Findings indicate that articulations of intimacies from the margins is the creation of new knowledge that is otherwise absent in mainstream understandings. These newer understandings have implications on how mental health support to couples is provided, how research on queer topics should be conducted and how curriculum on topics of gender-sexuality should be developed. Direction for further research is suggested.

Keywords: queer, sexuality, LGBTQ, queer couples, intimacy, romantic relationships, standpoint epistemology, queer theory, feminist theory

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Abbreviations

AFAB- Assigned Female at Birth

AMAB- Assigned Male at Birth

APA- American Psychological Association

DAC- Doctoral Advisory Committee

FTM- Female To Male

GACP- Gay Affirmative Counselling Practice

HIV-AIDS- Human Immunodeficiency Virus- Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

IPS- Indian Psychiatric Society

LBT- Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender

LG- Lesbian, Gay

LGBT- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender

LGBTQI+- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex Plus

M/F- Male or Female

MHP- Mental Health Practitioner

MSM- Men Who Have Sex With Men

MSSI- Miller Social Intimacy Scale

PhD- Doctor of Philosophy

PIQ- Psychosocial Intimacy Questionnaire

PUCL-K- People's Union for Civil Liberties, Karnataka

QACP- Queer Affirmative Counselling Practice

TISS- Tata Institute of Social Sciences

UK- United Kingdom

USA- United States of America

WIQ- Waring Intimacy Questionnaire

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

"Intimacy is experienced in its many hues: a fear of having it, a fear of losing it, the joy of finding it, dreams of acquiring it, in fierce moments of protecting it, in long-lasting unions, in transient moments of intense connections, in the humaneness of our relationships."

- Nair in Mitra and Nair, Intimate Others (2011)

Intimate relationships form an integral part of our lives. The complexities of our emotions and experiences come alive in the romantic relationships we form as adults (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Attraction, desire, love and intimacy are experiences many people look forward to sharing with someone. We live in a society where heterosexuality is considered the only legitimate sexual orientation; man-woman are the only two visible genders; marriage and family is the only acceptable way of relating (Menon, 2012; Sen et al., 2011, Sharma, 2006). Yet so many people experience love and intimacy that cannot be contained within this social norm. Despite the fear and shame that may soon follow, those initial stirrings are often a thrilling experience. Then starts the journey of exploring one's sexuality and seeking out others like oneself to share intimacies with (Bhan & Narrain, 2005; Sharma, 2006; Sukthankar, 1999). These intimacies are what my PhD research is attempting to capture. How do queer persons assigned female at birth (AFAB), experience and express intimacies in romantic relationships, in a society that doesn't 'allow' it? How do they navigate and affirm togetherness in a society that otherwise tends to invisibilise their intimacies?

Intimacy, relationships, sexuality and culture all overlap when the subject of study is intimacy (Felmlee & Sprecher, 2000). Intimacy is considered a psychological experience and is made up of behavioural, cognitive and affective components (Gaia, 2002). Intimacy is usually experienced in an interpersonal/ relational context involving another person/s (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). Intimacy in romantic relationships, which my study is interested in, is usually in the context of marriages and families. This brings intimacy into the realm of sexuality which has predominantly been heterosexual and gendered. Ideas

and ideals of intimacy, relationships and sexuality are influenced by prevailing cultural norms (Santore, 2008).

Michel Foucault (1976) in his seminal works on sexuality, writes in Part One of History of Sexuality, "at the beginning of the 17th century a certain frankness was still common, it would seem. Sexual practices had a little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit." He then traces how Victorian values impose a certain conjugal norm upon sex and sexuality towards the nineteenth century. This is important to recognise since it has implications on who, with whom and where intimacy is expected to be experienced. Intimacy, throughout history, has had to reckon with social norms prevalent in those times. Impact of changing cultural norms of intimacy on heterosexual marriage and families has been the predominant focus. Various scholars have traced the cultural impact in contemporary times to capitalist market forces, rise of individualism, presence of technology, rise of services providing therapy and care as well as social movements around gender (Santore, 2008). "Alterations to intimacy have been explored in connection to a vast ensemble of recent social transformations, including issues such as sexuality, the reworking of the traditional family structure, the ubiquitous presence of technology, and the commercialization of care" (Andreescu, 2020, p. 1-2).

Several disciplines have engaged with intimacy, relationships and sexualities. Sociology has historically been preoccupied with the heterosexual family and social changes that call for a shift in the family structure have been perceived as crisis or threat to family life (Gabb & Silva, 2011). However, there is increasing recognition that experiences of intimacy are no longer contained within heterosexual marriage and family. "The normative grip of the sexual and gender order that has underpinned the modern family is weakening. In this context, much that matters to people in their personal lives increasingly takes place beyond the boundaries of 'the family', between partners who are not living together 'as family', and within networks of friends" (Roseneil, 2005, p. 241). Couples Therapy, Marital Therapy, Family Therapy and associated disciplines that work in a therapeutic context with intimacies, relationships and sexualities have had to engage

with the changing norms around intimacies (Gurman, 2010). With the rise of feminist and queer visibility and literature, engagements with intimacy, relationships and sexuality moved beyond the heterosexual family (Peplau, 1982). Several disciplines have thrown light on the social construction of sexuality and its connection to intimacy and relationships. Misra and Chandiramani (2005) write in their book, Sexuality, Gender and Rights:

> Social science has shown how sexuality is culturally mediated rather than biologically predestined. Anthropology has described how sexual hierarchies operate, whereby those whose behavior is considered more palatable attain respect and rights that are denied to those of less conventional behavior and expression (Rubin 1984). In the 1990s, 'queer theory' went further, deconstructing societies preconceptions and representations of sexuality and gender and the relationship between them, and the stabilizing the established sexual order. (p. 15)

Disciplines are beginning to recognise the connections between intimacy and social norms and call for newer ways to study and broaden understandings on intimacy (Gabb & Silva, 2011). There is increasing recognition that the foundations for therapeutic work with intimacies has largely been the heterosexual family and is inadequate and even damaging to apply this to all intimacies (Adams et al., 2009; Ussher, 1991). Documentation and writing in therapeutic journals on non-heterosexual intimacies is woefully less as compared to heterosexual intimacies (Alonzo, 2005). Practitioners who are heterosexual reveal that they are unsure on how to engage with non-heterosexual intimacies despite one in ten of their cases being a non-heterosexual client (ibid). This recognition has led to conducting research, generating new theoretical frameworks and equipping oneself as practitioners to work with intimacies in broader ways in the Global North.

In the Indian context, the site of intimacies has primarily been the heterosexual 'arranged marriage' in accordance with a Hindu caste-segregated society. Sen et al. (2011) write in their Introduction to the book Intimate Others, "a historical analysis of intimate relations

in the Indian context reveals a continuous hegemonic status conferred to conjugality despite it being *one* of the *many* relationships of gender" (p. 2). They trace historical debates on the growing control on women's sexuality around the eighteenth century. Social reform movements in India during the nineteenth century focussed on women in marriages and ended up widening the gap between women along class and caste lines (ibid). Particular to India, caste and gender are deeply intertwined and inequalities are maintained through control over women's sexualities and bodies. "Notions of caste 'purity' and women's 'purity' are ideological constructs that work in collusion to keep the social order from breaking up" (Franco et al., 2007, p. 141). Social institutions such as marriage, family, law, medicine, religion and caste all play a role in maintaining the heterosexual and gendered nature of intimacies. In her Introduction to the book Sexualities, Menon (2007) details how modernity has lent itself to creating a normative sexuality. Colonialism and Brahmin norms of modernism and respectability diluted rights of women, dividing women into good and bad women by stigmatising women's sexualities and expressions (ibid). The 1990s brought globalization and economic liberalization and continued to widen the gap between the modern Indian woman and the poor and working-class woman. The institution of marriage stayed intact in its hegemonic status. "Thus, marriage in globalizing India is being updated, glamorized while not losing any of its old, standard functions as the bedrock of reproduction, caste and communities and is today at the heart of our economy" (Sen et al., 2011, p.8).

Marriage is an almost compulsory reality for women in India. Adhering to social norms is considered a social duty and is upheld above interpersonal intimacy with social backlash when norms are transgressed (Fernandez, 2002). It is almost impossible for the heterosexual woman to engage with marriage as a site for intimacy. Dhawan (2011) in her chapter, The 'Legitimate' in Marriage: Legal Regulation and Social Norms comments:

> The state regulates marriage through the institution of law. Marriage, however, it's also about intimate relationships between two individuals located within the material, cultural and political realms of the social order. Any attempt by individuals, especially women, to challenge existing hierarchies of class, caste

> and community is seen as potentially disruptive of the social order. This explains the significance of social and legal regulation of marital relationships. (Sen et al., 2011, p. 149)

In such a context, feminist and queer literature has attempted to challenge this hegemonic status (Sharma, 2006). Even if one were to move beyond arranged marriages to love, it is still the heterosexual marriage that promises intimacy. Biswas (2011) in Intimate Others comments, "The official idea of intimacy is circumscribed by marriage. Almost every instance of romantic love aspires to a life-time commitment, and marriage is seen as the most tested way to realise that aspiration" (p. 417). Sen et al. (2011) in Part IV Recasting Marriage: Singlehood, Coupledom and Intimate Others in the book Intimate Others, provide narratives of women from different social and identity locations. These narratives provide crucial critiques and open up possibilities for intimacy within and outside marriage. The autonomous women's movement in India has always had strong critiques of marriage and family as unequal, patriarchal institutions. The women's movement conferences in the nineties, were amongst the first to create and provide space for non-heterosexual intimacies to be discussed, shared and experienced. Women's Studies conferences in mid-2000s became another space for intimacies to move beyond the heterosexual realm (ibid). Alongside, these feminist movements, the queer movements in India asserted the rights of queer people to live and love. This further opened up the context of intimacies (Bhan & Narrain, 2005; Narrain, 2018). "The term 'counter-heteronormative' is used to refer to a range of political assertions that implicitly or explicitly challenge heteronormativity and the institution of monogamous patriarchal marriage" (Menon, 2007, p. 3). As compared to the Global North, the field of mental health and Psy disciplines has had little engagement with non-heterosexual intimacies and relationships and often end up perpetuating social norms (Ranade, 2009; Chakravarty, 2019). Thus, the context of intimacy in India too is situated within social and cultural norms. Voices from the margins have asserted their right to love and intimacy despite overarching patriarchal presence of compulsory heterosexuality, arranged marriages (often forced onto women) and caste and gender inequalities. These voices and their experiences of intimacies are what I would like to engage with in this study in all its diversity and richness.

Arriving at the Subject of Study

In order to maintain the integrity of this study, I must share that choosing to focus the PhD on queer intimacies has come from a deeply personal space. Then in order to lend rigor to the study, I delved into doing literature review to better understand how queer intimacies can be studied. Both these processes are described below.

My Personal Journey with Intimacies

I have been preoccupied with understanding intimacies in a romantic relationship for nearly three decades now. I was thirteen when I began to realise, I was different from my peers. Though I had absolutely no language to understand or describe my feelings, I knew I was different because I had very strong feelings for girls in my class while they were interested in the boys. I had crushes on female teachers. And when I was pursued by boys professing their undying love, I was usually amused and never took their attention seriously. I also looked different from the other girls. I was a tom-boy- preferred short hair, played games like cricket and football and wore only shoes with laces to school (like the boy students wore). The pressure to be in a relationship with a boy began to mount for me between the ages of eighteen to twenty-two. Though I was in a relationship with a girl it was hidden from others, we did not even know what to call it and we never acknowledged it to each other. I was terrified of being caught. I pretended I liked boys and tried to go out with them but could not muster enough interest to even kiss them. At this time, the peer pressure was strong enough for me to grow my hair and wear clothes that were feminine like salwar-kameez and sarees though my personal favourite dressing style was jeans and t-shirt with a windcheater.

When I was twenty-three, I fell in love with a woman who was my junior in college. And it was she who first introduced me to the possibility that I might be “homosexual”. She said it quite bluntly, “We are two women. That makes us homosexuals.” I remember feeling ashamed, horrified and immediately telling myself, “I love the ‘person’ that she is. It does not matter if she is a woman like I am.” This is how my journey began. My journey to discover myself and become more and more of who I authentically am has

almost always played out in my romantic relationships. I fell in love with a woman, it made me acknowledge my sexuality. She took me to a collective of ‘lesbian and bisexual women’ and that is where I became aware of the political nature of gender-sexuality and my intimacies. I was fortunate enough to fall in love a few times and was able to explore different ways of doing relationships and slowly but surely come to terms with my butch lesbian identity.

However, none of this was easy. On an everyday basis, I experienced an erasure and devaluing of my intimacies from members of the heterosexual world. One, they often would not know about my intimacies at all. Two, they would know of my intimacies in bits and parts only. Three, even if I could tell them more, their understanding of it wouldn’t match my experience. For example, I was so proud about how I managed an open relationship for ten years only to find that I was being morally judged by some family members. I am also proud of how in the absence of any legal or social support, I managed to create a chosen family for myself. However, I found that this chosen family was not considered at par with my family of origin. I have had to work very hard to explain my values and my life to friends and family and often I came away dissatisfied with their take on my intimacies. This is not me trying to paint heterosexual people in a bad light. This is simply an indication of the kind of society we live in, where if you don't fit in, you are devalued. However, when I have had heterosexual people (family, friends, colleagues) open themselves up to the idea of possibilities beyond heterosexual intimacies, we have made great strides in them being able to affirm my intimacies. For example, when I turned forty this year, all the important people in my life were present together on one Zoom call to wish me: family of origin, chosen family, my girlfriend and all the critters who depend on me (including an eight-year-old kid)!

I engaged with my intimacies in a therapeutic space over a ten-year period. I received support and validation for my queerness and my relationships in the therapy I accessed. In addition, I am part of queer spaces and I am a queer affirmative mental health practitioner. This has given me the opportunity to engage with queer people and their intimacies in queer collective spaces as well as in the therapeutic services I provide.

It might perhaps be hard to believe that I have been so preoccupied for nearly three decades with ‘matters of the heart’. But that is because I found myself always on the margins. And yet, these same intimacies helped peel away the normative ideas of gender-sexuality and brought me closer to the me that I really was all along. Therefore, my engagement with intimacies has not been just an intellectual one. It is deeply emotional and deeply political. I wanted to do my PhD with a ‘topic’ that I was passionate about. And queer intimacy was the only thing that came to me. I knew from my experience how transformative these intimacies are and it felt like a deep loss to not see them authentically represented in academics.

Literature Review

The main themes that I started out with were intimacy, sexuality, gender, relationships, queer and couple therapy. I tried to build my understanding of these themes drawing on studies mainly from sociology and psychology disciplines. For each theme, I tried to map out the literature conceptually, chronologically and geographically (Global North and Indian). I looked at queer and feminist academic literature on these themes. I even drew on fiction, poetry and literature generated by queer-trans communities. I did extensive literature review on methodologies on how these themes are studied.

There are two ways in which I have presented the literature review. One is a separate section on Additional Literature Review that also includes Table 1.1 which highlights some studies in this format- author/year/location; purpose of the study; methodology and research design; key findings. Secondly, a major chunk of the literature review, I have interspersed with key concepts of my study in the section below.

Key Concepts

The key concepts that I will elaborate below are 1) intimacy, 2) social constructs of gender-sexuality, 3) romantic relationships, 4) queer and persons assigned gender female at birth (AFAB). Literature review helps reveal how each key concept is defined, its origin/ history, how it has been studied, the gaps and how I have operationalised it in my study.

Intimacy

Definitions: Sternberg's (1986) defines intimacy as, "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships. It thus includes within its purview those feelings that give rise, essentially, to the experience of warmth in a loving relationship" (p. 119). S.B. Levine (1991) has described intimacy as the "glue" of all relationships. Schaefer & Olson (1981) defined intimacy as a "process that occurs over time" and as an "experience" which is an "outcome of sharing intimate experiences". Intimacy was defined in terms of behaviours such as self-disclosure, sharing, gestures of affection or as a process of two people getting close to each other (Gaia, 2002).

Origins/ History: In her paper titled Understanding Emotional Intimacy: A Review Of Conceptualization, Assessment And The Role Of Gender, author A. Celeste Gaia (2002) has done an extensive review of how intimacy has been researched over the last few decades. She reviewed how intimacy has been conceptualized, assessed and defined. Schaefer & Olson (1981) in their article Assessing Intimacy: The Pair inventory extensively detail out the origins of studying intimacy. Intimacy was first theorised in the clinical space. In his life-span theory, consisting of eight psychosocial stages, Erik Erikson (1950) conceptualised intimacy in the sixth stage- Intimacy vs Isolation. Harry Stack Sullivan (1953), a psychiatrist, described intimacy as essential to a person feeling validated and worthy. Maslow's hierarchy of needs lists intimacy as an important step in emotional growth and moving towards self-actualization. Attachment Theories, pioneered by Bowlby and Harlow between mid-1950s to 1970s and Ainsworth (1971) have explained the role of intimacy in adulthood. More contemporary conceptualizations have drawn from these earlier theories. Orlofsky, Marcia and Lesser (1973) developed four categories of intimacy and Olson (1975) describes intimacy as having seven types.

Van den Broucke, Stephan & Vandereycken, Walter & Vertommen, Hans (1995) in their article titled Marital intimacy: Conceptualization and assessment, have reviewed the various theoretical models used to study intimacy.

They describe mainly four models:

1. Lifespan Developmental Model based on the works of Erikson (1950), Sullivan (1953) and Orlofsky, Marcia and Lesser (1973) that focussed mainly on the connection between identity and intimacy.
2. Motivational Model based on conceptualizations by McAdams (1982), intimacy is again an individual attribute which is reflected in a person's relationships based on their readiness to experience closeness, warmth and communication.
3. The Equilibrium Model based on conceptualizations by Argyle and Dean (1985) suggests that intimacy is more a matter of relationships and interactions in the relationship rather than an individual attribute.
4. The Equity Model based on the works of Acitelli and Duck (1987), Sternberg (1988) and Levinger (1988) suggests that intimacy need not only be viewed as individual or relational. "A conceptualization of intimacy must, therefore, encompass both perspectives, just as most researchers will acknowledge that individual behavior is determined by the interaction of personal and situational influences. This view has been incorporated in most recent social psychological definitions of intimacy" (p. 220).

In the same paper, the authors propose an Integrated Model of Marital Intimacy that refers to intimacy as a "dyadic phenomenon" which includes "affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects" (p. 222).

How intimacy has been studied: Literature review reveals that intimacy has been studied by the development of psychometric scales that measured different factors to assess intimacy. Schaefer, M. T. & Olson, D. H. developed the Personal Assessment Of Intimacy In Relationships Scale (PAIR) that consists of a set of thirty-six measures to assess intimacy within relationships based on emotional intimacy, social intimacy, sexual intimacy, intellectual intimacy and recreational intimacy (Schaefer & Olson, 1981).

In a review of intimacy assessments, Van den Broucke et al (1995) and A. Celeste Gaia (2002) mention the following scales;

1. Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSSI) (1982) was developed to assess intimacy in all relationships such as friends, acquaintances and family members.
2. Waring Intimacy Questionnaire (WIQ) developed by E.M. Waring and J.R. Reddon (1983). This ninety item scale is based on eight different components of marital intimacy: Affection, Cohesion, Expressiveness, Compatibility, Conflict Resolution, Sexuality, Autonomy, Identity.
3. The Psychosocial Intimacy Questionnaire (PIQ) was developed by S.A. Tesch and looks at three dimensions of psychosocial intimacy: romantic love, supportiveness, communication ease.
4. C.J. Descutner and M.H. Thelen (1991) developed the Fear of Intimacy Scale that considered three dimensions: Content, Emotional Valence and Vulnerability.
5. Van den Broucke et al (1995) developed the Marital Intimacy Questionnaire which has fifty-six items on which a person self reports on intimacy problems, consensus, openness, affection and commitment.

Theorists interested in capturing laypersons' meanings of intimacy have used data collection methods from the field of social psychology such as narratives and interviews. Social psychological qualitative data collection methods such as narratives and interviews began to broaden assessments of intimacy (Gaia, 2002). Research began to focus on the interaction between people in the context of relationships as well as how laypersons define intimacy in general in a variety of relationships. Such research resulted in defining intimacy more broadly and in a variety of contexts and populations rather than only as a romantic feature in heterosexual relationships. It shed light on intimacy as a combination of emotional expressiveness, self-disclosure, support, sharing activities and physical affection. "These methods have been especially fruitful in identifying how laypersons define and experience intimacy in their relationships (...) produce rich, contextualised material that can be derived from a variety of populations" (Gaia, 2002, p. 155).

Gaps: The gap in studying intimacy is that it has been theorised in heterosexual contexts and tools developed to assess intimacy have been mainly with heterosexual populations in heterosexual relationships.

Operationalising intimacy in my study: What resonated with me was the description "essence of intimacy" (Gaia, 2002). This is what I would like to capture: What is the "essence of intimacy" for queer AFAB persons? How do they describe it?

Social Constructs of Gender-Sexuality

Definitions: To understand gender-sexuality as social constructs would mean the recognition that matters of gender and sexuality and their naturalness is socially created and maintained by social norms/ rules. Carla A. Pfeffer (2012) writes:

> Normativity has been described as a "charmed circle" within which social privilege, opportunity, and freedom from stigma are conferred to those conforming to particular social rules and regulations (Rubin 1984). Some of these rules and regulations dictate that opposite-sex, normatively gendered individuals monogamously pair (Jackson 2006; Kitzinger 2005). (p. 577)

In our society, bodies are divided into two distinct categories and gender is constructed as a binary- as male and female- with distinct gender roles that are strictly enforced (Shah, Merchant, Mahajan, & Nevatia, 2015). It is mandated that sexual relations can happen only between these two genders and within the institution of a monogamous marriage that has a purpose of procreation to fulfil. (Bhan & Narrain, 2005; Menon, 2012). This is what is considered 'normal' bodies, genders, sexuality and ways of relating. These understandings on gender-sexuality are socially constructed and different social institutions collude to maintain it through social norms/ rules. These understandings on what is normal and acceptable is embedded in our culture so deeply that it is almost impossible to recognise them as normative and socially constructed. "Normal" and "heterosexual" are understood as synonymous (…) To put it crudely, heteronormativity creates a language that is "straight." Living within heteronormative culture means learning to "see" straight, to "read" to "think" straight" (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 202).

A multiplicity, diversity and fluidity of experiences and expressions in the realm of bodies, genders, sexualities and relationships does exist. However, this vast spectrum of experiences and expressions is not equally visible or acceptable in many cultures. There exists a hierarchy of unequal power in society. Patriarchy, casteism, racism, ableism are social structures that assume superiority of only certain realities and oppress those who are considered inferior. Similarly, gender-sexuality is conceptualised as an oppressive social structure which is regulated by the social norms of heteronormativity and the body-gender binary. Allen & Mendez (2018) use the term "hegemonic heteronormativity" to describe this inequality that is embedded in social structures. Gender and sexuality are regulated by social and cultural processes in order to maintain social hierarchies (Ward & Schneider, 2009). Normative can therefore be defined as people and realities that fit the social norms of gender-sexuality and non-normative can be defined as those people and realities that do not conform to these norms.

Origins/ History: Sexuality is shaped by socio-political and cultural norms is an idea put forth by several theorists. Michael Warner (1991) in Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet traces some of the history of social theories that made the connection between sexuality and politics:

> French social thought from Bataille to Deleuze; radical psychoanalysis, elaborated from Freud by Reich and others; the Frankfurt School (...) critical liberalism of Bentham (or Sade) (...) Liberationist sexual movements (...) radical gay social theory revived after 1969 in France, England, and Italy (...) And in recent years feminists have returned powerfully to the topics of sexuality and lesbian/gay politics in the work of Gayle Rubin, Adrienne Rich, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Iris Marion Young, and many others. (p. 6)

Michael Foucault's History of Sexuality elaborates on Victorian values confined sex and sexuality to heterosexual families. Gayle Rubin (1984) conceptualised the "charmed circle" which creates a hierarchy in society to maintain norms of sexuality and gender. Rewards and punishments are socially meted out based on level of conformity (ibid). "Heteronormativity" as a concept was introduced by Warner (1991). Warner's book Fear of a Queer Planet (1993) throws light on social theory and queer politics and the need for

social theories to be revised using queer politics. In their books, Female Masculinity (Halberstam, 1998) and Gender Trouble (Butler, 1999), these pioneers of queer theory began to throw light on how femininities and masculinities are socially constructed. Trans and intersex people questioned the naturalness of sex and gender. Pathbreaking writings in The Transgender Studies Reader, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (2006), lay bare how bodies, genders and sexualities are socially constructed.

How social construction of gender-sexuality has been studied: Understanding gender-sexuality as social constructs interlinked with race, caste, class, religion, patriarchy and recognising the social forces that perpetuate and maintain inequality has been a critical contribution from the margins. Warner (1991) writes:

> Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricated with gender, with the family, with notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences. (p. 6)

Applying this understanding to knowledge production and as an analytical lens to study realities has been useful in critiquing knowledge systems that are made by and continue to serve those in power. Feminist and queer research calls for a revamping of how lives on the margins are studied. Feminist Standpoint theorists Dorothy Smith (1974), Nancy Hartsock (1983), Donna Haraway (1988) and Sandra Harding (2004) propose that all knowledge is "socially situated" and knowledge must be generated from "oppressed" locations.

Gaps: Knowledge from the margins that is rooted in lived and felt experiences continues to be sidelined within mainstream academia. Queer and feminist approaches to research have not gained much popularity, perhaps because of their critical lens on how power operates within knowledge production.

Operationalising social constructs of gender-sexuality in my study: Queer intimacies is located within the 'social context' of heteronormativity and body-gender binary. For the purposes of this study, heteronormativity is the social understanding where heterosexuality, that is attraction between a 'man' and a 'woman', is considered the ideal, 'normal' sexual orientation. Romantic/ intimate relationships are considered valid when they are between a 'man' and a 'woman' and usually arranged to match social categories such as caste and class. The body-gender binary is the social understanding that 'normal' bodies and 'normal' genders are only of two types: a binary- man/male and woman/female. This is what I mean by a social context of heteronormativity and body-gender binary.

The term cis-het refers to a cis-gender, heterosexual person: someone who fits the normative understanding of body, gender and sexuality. I will use the terms cis-het/ normative/ mainstream for those who fit social norms of gender-sexuality and non-normative/ on the margins/ marginalised for those who are pushed out by these social norms.

Romantic Relationships

Definitions: Romantic relationships are, "defined as "mutually acknowledged ongoing voluntary interactions", these relationships, unlike others such as friendships, are characterized by a particular intensity, specific expressions of affection, and initiation in erotic sexual encounters" (Gómez-López et all, 2019, p. 2). Romantic relationships carry aspects of love, intimacy, closeness, care and togetherness and are distinct from other relationships because of the elements of attraction, desire and romantic love that are present. Literature review on romantic relationships revealed that a romantic relationship is considered a developmental stage of adolescents and early adulthood and studies are largely designed for that age group (Arnette, 2000; Collins, 2003; Gómez-López et al., 2019; Jerves et al., 2013; Xia et al., 2018). Sasha Roseneil (2005) throws light on how understanding of love and care is based within the heterosexual marriage and heterosexual family and romantic relationships may therefore not be considered a serious enough or valid enough type of relationship "yet, if we seek our understanding of

relationships from the sociological literature, it seems as if love, intimacy and care are almost exclusively practised under the auspices of 'family'." (p. 242). Terms such as intimate relationships and "practices of intimacy" are emerging to widen the scope of the traditional sites of intimacy which have been the heterosexual marriage and family (Lynn Jamieson, 2011).

Origin/ History: Romantic relationships have been studied from a life stage perspective. Erikson (1950) in the sixth stage Intimacy vs Isolation believed that this conflict must be resolved in a romantic/ sexual relationship. Both Erikson (1950) and Sullivan (1953) believed that heterosexual relationships would be the area where intimacy can be achieved in a fulfilling manner. Attachment Theories, pioneered by Bowlby, Harlow and Ainsworth on infant and caregiver bonds have influenced the understanding of intimacy experiences in adult heterosexual relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Gaia, 2002). Romantic relationships appear in literature almost as a precursor to heterosexual marriage and family. Within literature on relationship studies and marital and family studies, the dominant understanding is that the sites for romance and intimacy ideally are the heterosexual marriage and family (Ritvo & Glick, 2002).

The connection between intimacy and relationships is reflected in several studies (Jamieson & Ekerwald, 2000; Moss & Schwebel, 1993; Sternberg, 1986; Van den Broucke et al., 1995). "The common relational threads that eventually form the fabric of romantic relationships are experiences that support the development of intimacy" (Collins & Sroufe, 1999, p. 1). While the connection between intimacy and relationships is established, the assumption that the relationship is a heterosexual and marital one continues to persist (Gurman, 2010; Roseneil, 2005). Within heterosexual relationships, there is increasing recognition that the institution of marriage and family in their traditional forms have undergone change due to socio-political and cultural influences.

In her chapter titled, 'Living and loving beyond the boundaries of the heteronorm: personal relationships in the 21st century', in Families and Society, Sasha Roseneil (2005) comments:

> Anthony Giddens' (1992) argument about the 'transformation of intimacy' and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's (1995, 2002) work on the changing meanings and practices of love and family relationships suggest that, in the contemporary world processes of individualisation, detraditionalisation and increased self-reflexivity are opening up new possibilities and expectations in heterosexual relationships. (p. 246)

Many studies continue to draw on theories that were developed based on heterosexual marriage and family. Jesse Fox (2015) in her article 'Models of Relationship Development' reviews some of the major models used to study relationships: filter theory, social exchange theories, social penetration theory, Knapp's relational stage model, stimulus-value-role theory, premarital dyadic formation model and hyperpersonal model. She points out that these models might not be adequate to cover all types of relationships including those of queer people. Several studies especially with non-heterosexual populations have led to the questioning of theoretical frameworks and systems of knowledge about relationships as being restrictive, inadequate, exclusionary and harmful (Fox, 2015; Pfeffer, 2012; Roseneil, 2005). Researchers across disciplines are now recognising this and urging research to focus on exploring newer frameworks and theories to study relationships (Gabb & Silva, 2011).

How queer relationships have been studied: Alfred Kinsey (1948) is the first ever to have conducted a large-scale study on sexual behaviours that highlighted sexual acts and behaviours that were not limited to heterosexuality. It is considered a landmark study on sexuality. Given the subject of this study, I focussed more particularly on understanding how romantic relationships of queer persons have been studied. I reviewed literature on 1) same-sex couples and 2) studies done specifically about lesbian and bisexual women's relationships. Terms like same-sex partnerships, lesbian-gay relationships, homosexual couples, same-sex unions have been used to describe romantic relationships of queer

people in research. Terms have been evolving in engagement with queer rights activism and terms from the acronym LGBTQI+ and queer are being used more in the last decade instead of homosexual and same-sex.

An extensive literature review of empirical studies of same-sex couples in the United States was conducted by Peplau and Fingerhut (2007). According to their article, interest in studying same-sex couple was on the rise in 1970s, dipped after that due to interest in AIDS related research in 1980s and then picked up again in 2000s. Therefore, their review has research that dates back ten to twenty years. Typically, research was conducted on people who self-identified as gay or lesbian, mainly younger, white, well-educated and middle class. Studies primarily obtained data from one partner of the couple.

In the same review they elaborate that several studies compared the qualities that gay, lesbian and heterosexual people seek in their partners and found that regardless of sexual orientation affection, dependability, shared interest and religious beliefs mattered. Other studies were interested in how gay and lesbian couples organised their relationships in the absence of the heterosexual marriage which was organised around division of labour and power and decision-making authorities. It was found that in same-sex couples, both partners usually had greater economic independence and sharing of tasks was distributed more equitably. One set of studies focussed on measuring relationship satisfaction and quality. Stereotypes suggest that same-sex couples are unhappy or dysfunctional but there was no evidence to support this in the studies done. There was no significant difference in relationship quality of same-sex or heterosexual couples. Attitudes about sexuality, sexual behaviours and open relationships were also studied. There were differences in attitudes about monogamy. It was found that scales to measure sexual satisfaction did not account for the absence of peno-vaginal sex and therefore were inadequate to capture the sexual lives of lesbian, bisexual women. In terms of conflict and partner violence no significant difference in frequency or resolution was found as compared to heterosexuals. Studies that focussed on commitment and stability did not have sufficient data on the longevity of same-sex couples due to lack of access to research participants. Other studies

found that gay and lesbian couples would end their relationships if they were unhappy in it as compared to heterosexuals. The reason for this was found to be institutional barriers such as having to go through a divorce to end a relationship in heterosexuals. Several studies focussed on the impact of legalization of same-sex unions but lack of data led to inconclusive results. Studies on lesbian and gay couples with children has consistently found that childcare is divided in an egalitarian manner as compared to heterosexual couples where the wife does more of the childcare than the husband. One set of studies has examined the role of social stigma on couples and it has been consistently reported that stigma, discrimination and oppression due to sexuality has added to the struggles of LGBTQ people and can often have negative impact on their relationships.

Similar to this extensive review by Peplau and Fingerhut, in my literature review of same-sex couples, I found themes coinciding with their review. One set of studies has compared heterosexual relationships and same-sex relationships and tried to draw out the similarities and differences between these relationships. Studies have focused on understanding conflict-resolution, power, decision-making, stability, commitment, relationship satisfaction and gender roles between couples (Kurdek, 2004, 2005). Some studies have explored the role of legal sanction/ recognition on the wellbeing of the relationships (Porche & Purvin, 2008). In a study done nationally across USA with 604 same-sex couples in committed relationships, results from cross-sectional analyses indicated that adults in legally formalized same-sex unions reported higher relationship satisfaction and lower instability (Whitton, Kuryluk & Khaddouma, 2015). These participants were invited to participate by publishing the study through LGBT organizations and on flyers at pride marches. Studies have also shown that LGBT couples do not necessarily replicate marriage (Green, 2010). Some have critiqued the institutions of marriage and family in their studies with black LGBT families and transgender families (Battle & Ashley, 2008; Pfeffer, 2012). Pfeffer's study collected data from sixty-one partnerships of fifty cis women across USA and Canada and her findings challenge traditional notions of families. Studies have focused on social factors that affect relationships and disputed earlier held notions that LGBT people are inherently not capable of forming healthy relationships. Internalized stigma, shame, fear, invisibility,

lack of acceptance of the relationship, differences in outness, experiences of discrimination all affect the quality of the relationship. (Mereish & Poteat 2015; Testa, Kinder & Ironson, 1987). All queer couples undergo a set of unique stressors because of the social stigma attached to their sexuality: coping with homonegativity, erasure of their intimacies, no social or legal sanction for their intimate relationships, lack of support systems for the couple (Bigner & Wetchler, 2004; Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; Green & Mitchell, 2008). On the other hand, studies have shown that greater freedom from gender and sexual roles and a common experience of oppression strengthen relationships (Schrag, 1984). Relationships fare better when couples perceive social support for that relationship. A USA based descriptive study of sixty-nine gay and fifty lesbian cohabiting couples concluded that social support is linked to relationship quality and to psychological adjustment (Kurdek, 1988).

In my literature review about intimate relationships of lesbian and bisexual women, studies across USA, Canada and UK with lesbian and bisexual couples have focused on topics such as fusion, merging and high degree of emotional intimacy (Gold, 2003; Lindenbaum, 1985). Some studies have focussed on couples with children. One study compared forty-seven lesbian couples (40% of whom had children and 60% were child-free). Respondents were residents of Washington, Oregon, California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Washington, DC and contacted using non-random snowball sampling. Eight people were identified as having contact with the lesbian community and fliers were put up in three feminist bookstores to reach out to participants. This study used a quantitative methodology and through the survey method found that couples with children scored significantly higher on relationship satisfaction and sexual relationship (Koepke, 1992). Another set of studies takes into account the social context in which these relationships occur and their impact on relationship quality. In one study, degree of outness, internalized homophobia, lifetime and recent experiences of discrimination, butch/femme identity, relationship quality, and lifetime and recent experiences of domestic violence were assessed in a sample of 272 predominantly European-American lesbian and bisexual women. This was an empirical study that

concluded that internalized oppression resulted in poorer relationship quality (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005).

Gaps: Academic literature on studying intimate relationships of queer people is largely US and Eurocentric. Therefore, there is a need for studies to situate relationship experiences within specific cultural norms and values (Peplau et al., 2004).

When intimacy is being studied in the context of a relationship, that context historically has been the heterosexual marriage and family. "Sociology's tendency to fuse the study of (hetero)sex and intimacy means that the discipline fails to accord real attention to non-sexual intimacies or to sexual relationships outside the conjugal couple model" (Roseneil, 2005, p. 244). This means that non-heterosexual relationships are studied less. It also indicates that existing theoretical frameworks and models to study relationships may fall short in accurately capturing realities of queer intimate relationships (Fox, 2015).

The term 'romantic relationship' in a heterosexual context does not typically imply that it is a serious relationship between adults in love. Romantic relationships are considered a precursor to heterosexual marriages and family. Thus, when used in the context of queer relationships the seriousness, intensity and validity of that relationship may be devalued.

Operationalising romantic relationships in my study: Arriving at this term was much harder than I had thought. In heterosexual relationships, where intimacy is typically within the context of marriage, it is taken for granted that this is an adult relationship between two people where romance and sex are expected. It does not have to be spelled out. However, when it came to describing intimacies of queer people, how was I to define the relationship context in which these intimacies were happening? The term intimate relationships may convey a broader set of relationships that can be intimate but not necessarily romantic or sexual in nature. For example, many queer people describe their close queer friendships and families of choice as intimate (Roseneil, 2005). I was interested in adult queer people finding romance, love and togetherness. Therefore, I had to use a specific term 'romantic relationships' to convey the romance aspect without specific words like marriage being available.

For the purposes of this study the terms romantic relationships, intimate relationships and couples are being used interchangeably to specify the type of relationship context, which is a romantic one. I have deliberately not used couples in the title of study or as a key concept as couple indicates an interpersonal context or dyadic relationship and that has not been the entry point for me to study intimacies. Romantic relationships in this study does not imply that the study is focussed on young adults only or that the relationship shared is not a serious one.

Queer and Persons Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB)

Definitions: American Psychological Association (APA) states that "queer is an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms." However, queer goes much beyond this definition. It is also a political articulation that questions the validity of the normal and the legitimate. Queer examines how heteronormativity and the body-gender binary are social constructs and challenges their naturalness. People's identities, desires and relationships are far too varied and complex to be boxed into such a narrow reality. Menon (2012) shares:

> The term 'queer' indicates transgressive desire of all sorts, and enables a questioning of the supposed naturalness of the heterosexual identity. If we recognize that 'normal' heterosexuality is painfully constructed and that it is kept in place by a range of cultural, bio-medical and economic controls; and that these controls help sustain existing hierarchies of class and caste and gender, then we would have to accept that all of us are-or have the potential to be-queer. (p. 110)

This study focusses on queer persons assigned gender female at birth (AFAB). Firstly, let me clarify that AFAB is not a gender identity or location. It is a term that helps us understand how sex and gender is segregated into a binary at birth by being assigned either male or female (Shah, Merchant, Mahajan, & Nevatia, 2015). The term 'assigned gender' helps us reflect on how gender is thrust upon a person at birth based on their outward genital appearance. There is an automatic assumption that if a body has a penis-like anatomy, the gender of that body is male and the person will experience themselves

as a boy/man. If the body does not have a penis-like anatomy, the gender female is assigned to it. The two binary genders of boy and girl are expected to grow up fitting certain gender roles, according to social rules and expected to have one sexuality which is heterosexuality. This linear association between bodies, genders and sexualities and the connections that body = gender= sexuality is socially created (Ranade, Chakravarty, Nair, & Shringarpure, 2020; Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

Thus, assigned gender female at birth (AFAB) and assigned gender male at birth (AMAB) are terms used to understand assignments of female, male in a body-gender binary society. Those who fit these assignations are termed cis-gender persons/ cis-woman/ cis-man. For several people this assignation is violent and erases their experiences of their bodies and genders. These identities are largely understood within the spectrum of trans/ transgender/ non-binary persons/ gender-queer/ gender fluid. It is very important to recognise that different people use different labels and these labels contain their unique journeys and meanings. Any attempt to define labels in prescriptive ways leads to violence and erasure. We are learning from intersex and trans activists to the explode the naturalness of the body-gender binary, recognise it as a socially constructed process and reflect on the privilege and complicity of being cis-gender in such a society (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Susan Stryker (2006) in (De)Subjugated Knowledges, An Introduction to Transgender Studies, takes apart the naturalness of bodies and genders and reveals how the naturalness is socially constructed "the relationship between bodily sex, gender role, and subjective gender identity are imagined to be strictly, mechanically, mimetic—a real thing and its reflections" (p. 9).

Origin/ History: Given that my study is based in India, I am outlining the queer history and context of India. This history is drawn from literature available as well as my own experiences of the queer movement in India. Indian culture which is predominantly Hindu and savarna, is preoccupied with 'Indian family values.' There has been collusion of various social institutions to maintain these value systems. Arranged marriages in which family elders match social locations of caste, class and religion before the marriage is socially sanctioned is still prevalent (Menon, 2012; Sen et al, 2011). Within such a

culture, Narrain (2004) found "extreme hostility of Indian society to any expression of either same-sex desire or gender non-conformity. Societal institutions function under an imperative to mold the non-conformists into a heterosexist framework" (p. 147). Along with family, queer sexuality has been pathologised by mental health and legal systems. Only as recent as 2018, did the Indian Psychiatric Society[1] (IPS) finally declare "homosexuality is not a psychiatric disorder." The legal battle too has been tumultuous. The Delhi High Court read down Sec. 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2009 only to have the Supreme Court re-criminalise 'acts against the order of nature' in 2012. Legal activists continued the legal proceedings to finally have Sec. 377 read down on 6th Sept 2018 (Narrain & Elridge, 2009; Narrain, 2018).

These rights and freedoms have been a result of continuous activism of the queer movements in India over the last three decades. LGBTQI+ lives first got visibility in the 1990s when HIV-AIDS funding put its spotlight on sexual behaviours. Many organizations began work on reaching out to marginalized communities. MSM (men who have sex with men), male sex workers and transgender populations. Some organizations such as CREA[2] and TARSHI[3] broadened the scope of their work to beyond HIV-AIDS prevention and started focusing on sexual rights and sex-positivity. In the mid-90s and especially after the right-wing attacks on the film Fire in 1998, feminist groups such as Forum Against Oppression of Women (Bombay) and Saheli[4] (Delhi) from within the autonomous feminist movements became more vocal on matters of gender and sexuality (Fernandez, 2002). Heteronormativity as an oppressive and dominant social norm was strongly articulated by groups like PRISM, CALERI and Voices Against 377 (Menon, 2012). For the last twenty-five years, LBT[5] collectives such as LABIA[6], Saphho[7],

[1] https://indianpsychiatricsociety.org/ips-position-statement-regarding-lgbtq/

[2] https://www.creaworld.org/
[3] http://www.tarshi.net
[4] https://sites.google.com/site/saheliorgsite/
[5] LBT stands for Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender
[6] https://labiacollective.org/
[7] http://www.sapphokolkata.in/

Sahayatrika[8], LesBiT, Nazariya[9] (to name a few) have continued to challenge structural inequalities. With the growing visibility of persons who don't fit the norms, articulations around the body and gender binaries being oppressive social structures have been strengthened. Legal and civil society groups have addressed human rights violations of queer individuals over the last two decades (PUCL-K, 2001). Non-profit organizations providing counselling and support to queer-trans people have also steadily increased in the last decade. Pride marches take place in many metros of India such as Bombay, Kolkata, Delhi and Bangalore and other cities such as Lucknow, Chandigarh and Dehradun (to name a few). There is increased visibility of the LGBTQI+ community in India, thanks to the untiring work of over three decades, by human rights advocates and queer-trans activists (Bhan & Narrain, 2005; Fernandez, 2002; Narrain & Elridge, 2009; Narrain, 2018).

How queer has been studied: Given the focus of my study, I looked at literature review from within India on queer women, lesbian and bisexual women, queer persons assigned gender female at birth (AFAB). Research studies done with lesbian, bisexual women have focused on understanding and conceptualizing violence and the double marginalisation of being women and queer. In 2003, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) published a report on the nature of violence faced by lesbian women (Fernandez & Gomathy, 2003). Data was collected from fifty quantitative interviews and eight in-depth interviews with lesbian women across four cities- Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Pune. The study was particularly important in highlighting how the silence on lesbian sexuality was itself violence. Sappho for Equality (2011) developed the Vio-Map detailing violence and human rights violations in sexually marginalised women. This study also highlighted how violence is embedded in the very invisibility of lesbian, bisexual and trans lives. This study used oral narratives as a method to collect data from seventy-five participants who were lesbian, bisexual and trans persons, persons in their intimate circle, persons in larger society such as media, mental health practitioners and activists. CREA (2012) conducted a three-country research on Violence Faced by Marginalised Women in South Asia of which violence on lesbian women was one subset.

[8] https://www.facebook.com/Sahayaathrika
[9] https://nazariyaqfrg.wordpress.com/

The study reported lesbians facing discrimination, social exclusion and harassment when their sexuality was known, as well as the violence of living as an "outwardly conformist heterosexual woman". It also reported that care seeking and redressal for violence was low due to fear of stigma.

Some more studies carried out by queer-feminist LBT groups have situated lives of queer AFAB persons within larger social structures and contributed to queer-feminist conceptualizations of power and social justice (LABIA, 2013; Sappho For Equality, 2011, 2016). A research study by LABIA (2013) explored the gender journeys of fifty persons assigned female at birth. This study highlighted how gender plays out in public and private domains and the ways in which social hierarchies create "exclusion, marginalisation, pathologisation and violence." Sappho For Equality (2016) conducted a transnational study in India and UK to research what makes non-normative lives more "liveable."

Studies have focused on documenting human rights violations that queer people face. Queer-feminist literature in India has conceptualised the oppressive nature of heteronormativity and the body-gender binary on queer AFAB persons and the violence meted out to queer AFAB couples on discovery of intimate relationships. The People's Union for Civil Liberties, PUCL-K (2001) comments on the particular marginalisation that queer AFAB persons encounter "patriarchy forces all women, heterosexual or lesbian, into marriage, and pushes them into obligatory roles of mother and wife" (p. 27). In such a context, intimate relationships that queer AFAB persons have with each other are vulnerable to censure from families, peers, social networks and institutions. On discovery of intimate queer relationships there are documented instances of queer AFAB persons being denied access to education, forced separation or isolation and of being forced into heterosexual marriages. CREA (2012) elaborates "this included controlling or restricting their mobility and contact with girlfriends, monitoring their phone conversations, following them, and disrupting their relationships" (p. 96).

Gaps: In the Indian context, grey literature and literature within the queer community clearly highlights the love, togetherness and intensity of queer intimacies (Meenu &

Shruti, 2012; Pattanaik, 2014; Sharma, 2006; Sukthankar, 1999; Vanita & Kidwai, 2008). In studies conducted by queer-feminist LBT groups, the centrality of intimate relationships in the lives of queer AFAB persons emerges as a key theme as articulated by participants, despite the subject of study being violence or gender (CREA, 2012; LABIA, 2013; Sappho For Equality, 2011). This points to the importance of intimate relationships in the lives of queer AFAB persons. Sappho For Equality (2016) comments "intimate relationships are a major crux of one's liveability and survival. Relationships can bring different dimensions to our sense of living and surviving. To have somebody to love, to be able to live with somebody is an expectation that many nurture" (p. 43). However, no study has delved into queer intimacies of AFAB persons to capture intimate experiences, in a focussed and in-depth manner.

Operationalising Queer and AFAB in My Study: Queer is being conceptualised in two ways. One, queer is a political position, an ideology that challenges the social norms of heteronormativity and body-gender binary. The second is, queer as an identity. Despite the severe social conditioning towards life-long heterosexual marriage, monogamy and reproduction, people's lives are testimony that not everyone fits the norm. These are the identities and lives that get marginalised by the dominant social constructs of gender-sexuality and I am using the term 'queer' to define these.

AFAB is being used to recognise the segregation of sex and gender into a binary at birth and how people are assigned genders, limiting them to two genders, instead of upholding the genders they experience. It is not being used as an identity label for sex or gender.

Additional Literature Review

In addition to literature review to detail key concepts of the study, I looked at studies on queer couples within Couple and Family Therapy. Studies have revealed some important themes. Studies have engaged with recognising heterosexual bias of practitioners and of how heterosexual values are embedded in curriculum and training, in theories and research on mental health of LGBTQI+ populations. Literature review suggests that that mental health practice has to account for social stigma and its impact on queer couples.

Therefore, additional training and guidelines on affirmative practice have been developed in the UK and US.

Some key studies on same-sex couples have been chronologically summarised across three decades (between 1992 to 2018) in Table 1.1. The studies are primarily from the US. Some India-based studies with LBT persons have also been included in this table.

Examining Heterosexual Bias

Given the history of pathologising of sexuality in mental health some studies have focused on interrogating heterosexual bias (Testa, Kinder & Ironson 1987). In 1984, a task force of the American Psychological Association (APA) Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns investigated bias in psychotherapy. The findings revealed that therapist's heterosexist bias was a barrier in multiple ways to provide effective the therapeutic support to same-sex relationships (Garnets et al., 2008). For example, therapists may not recognise the importance of intimate relationships for gay and lesbian people or may fail to uphold the diversity of queer relationships.

Examining Theories and Frameworks in Couple and Family Therapy

Literature review revealed that existing frameworks were not adequate to work with queer couples. Adams et al. (2009) comment "theories that are based on a belief that heterosexuality is the only legitimate form of sexual identification, that monogamy is the norm, and that any other type of relating is deviant are not only inappropriate but may cause actual harm" (p. 254). Discriminatory practice exists within Couple and Family therapy. Couples and Family Therapy largely caters to heterosexual populations and is not offered to lesbian and gay couples. This happens because of therapist's belief that their knowledge and skills is not adequate for non-heterosexual populations (Ussher, 1991).

Impact of Social Stigma on Queer Couples

Several studies focussed on social stigma and how living as a queer person in a queer-negative environment impacts romantic relationships. "The most salient characteristic that distinguishes lesbian and gay couples from heterosexual couples as a group is that *all*

same-sex couples are vulnerable to similar kinds of prejudice, discrimination, and marginalization by persons and institutions outside of their relationships" (Green & Mitchell, 2008). Studies focused on minority stress(Meyers 1995, 2003; Schrag, 1984) and urged practitioners to engage with internalized stigma and shame during the therapy process and identify strategies for developing meaningful relationships (Addison & Coolhart, 2015; Green &Mitchell, 2008; Mereish & Poteat 2015).

Need for Additional Training and Knowledge

Reports and studies have pushed for additional training and equipping practitioners to be more responsive to queer people's needs and their relationships within couple therapy (Bigner & Wetchler, 2004; Kort, 2008; Ussher, 1991). Robert-Jay Green in the foreword to Relationship Therapy with Same-Sex Couples by Bigner & Wetchler (2004) urges "therapists who work with GLBTpopulations to get specific training and supervision in couple therapy and not assume that their general training in psychotherapy or expertise in GLBT mental health prepares them to do therapy with same-sex couples" (p. xv).

Developing Affirmative Curriculum and Guidelines

In the UK and the US, there is a shift towards developing ethical and bias-free practice with queer people (APA, 2000). In December 2000, American Psychological Association (APA) published a report in the American Psychologist on "Guidelines for Psychotherapy With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients." Guideline number five elaborated that psychologists must add to their knowledge and be respectful towards non-heterosexual relationships. They must be willing to make the connection between social stigma and common relationship problems. There are also concerns that present in therapy that arise because of a negative attitude towards same-sex relationships from various sources (ibid).

Indian Context

As seen in studies from the Global North, studies in India too reveal the particular vulnerabilities experienced by queer couples. Queer romantic relationships have no social sanction and/or legitimacy and thus are bereft of traditional sites of support such as family, peers and social networks (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2013). The lack of visible

relationship models, subversions and negotiations of gender roles, challenges to norms of monogamy and the lived realities of creating a queer family can take a significant toll on queer relationships (CREA, 2012; LABIA, 2013; Sappho For Equality, 2011, 2016). This makes the relationships vulnerable to a set of unique stressors. Despite these glaring mental health implications, the mental health system in India is not currently geared to meet the particular relationship needs of queer persons assigned female at birth and has been cited as homophobic (CREA, 2012; LABIA, 2013). These studies strongly recommended that mental health support systems needed to be responsive to queer needs (including intimacies).

There have been studies that have looked at unethical practices with queer people in therapeutic settings (Ranade, 2009) and there are guidelines on affirmative practice with queer clients (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2013, 2016). A study on which the Gay-Affirmative Counselling Practice: Resource and Training Manual (GACP) (2013) is based reveals that several mental health practitioners did engage with queer intimacies and queer couples in their therapeutic practice. This study did not extensively document these intimate experiences in an in-depth manner and the guidelines did not go into details on affirmative practice with queer couples. The study and the manual however strongly recommended that affirmative frameworks to work on queer intimacies was the need of the hour.

Table 1.1 Literature Review on Same-sex Couples

Author/ Year/ Location	**Purpose of the Study**	**Methodology and Research Design**	**Key Findings**
Koepke 1992 USA	Study relationship satisfaction of lesbian couples with and without children	Quantitative study, survey method. 47 lesbian couples participated. Participants recruited through fliers in feminist book stores.	Couples with children scored higher on relationship and sexual satisfaction.
Kurdek 1994 USA	Explore the link between frequency of conflict to different areas of relationship satisfaction	Interdependence theory used. Surveys sent to 108 heterosexual, 51 lesbian and 75 gay couples. LG couples recruited through publishing in LG newsletters and periodicals.	Over 90% LG participants were White. LG and heterosexual couples were more alike than different. Conflict regulation processes were similar. Frequency of conflict about power, social issues, distrust, intimacy, personal flaws was negatively linked to relationship satisfaction.
Peplau & Beals 2001 USA	Examined whether social involvement and disclosure of sexual orientation were systematically associated with the quality of women's relationships.	Secondary analysis of data from 784 lesbian couples. Volunteers were mailed questionnaires. Relationship satisfaction was measured through scales created by questionnaire items.	95% participants were White, age range 18 to 71 years, 59% college educated and 69% full time work. Modal relationship was 2-3 years. Lesbian couples were very satisfied with their relationship with low levels of conflict. Lesbians were out to 2 out of 5 people.

Table 1.1 Literature Review on Same-sex Couples (contd.)

Author/ Year/ Location	**Purpose of the Study**	**Methodology and Research Design**	**Key Findings**
Fernandez & Gomathy 2003 India	Study on nature of violence faced by lesbian women	Feminist Standpoint Epistemology. Feminist methodological principles. 50 quantitative interviews, 22 mental health practitioners and 8 in-depth interviews with lesbian women across 4 cities.	Lesbian participants were urban, middle-upper class and economically independent. Conceptualisations around violence from personal, private and social intersections; silence is violence; cycles of violence and domains of violence
Kurdek 2004 USA	Longitudinal study on relationship quality of LG couples and heterosexual couples	Cohabiting couples without children were compared longitudinally on different relationship variables.	Participants were predominantly White and college educated. On 50% of comparisons, LG couples were no different from heterosexual couples. On 78% comparisons, LG couples fared better. LG couples fared less well in receiving social support from family.
Balsam & Szymanski 2005 USA	Study impact of internalised oppression on relationship quality and domestic violence.	Empirical study. 272 predominantly European American lesbian and bisexual women participated.	Internalised oppression results in poorer relationship quality. Minority stress variables resulted in poorer quality of relationship.

Table 1.1 Literature Review on Same-sex Couples (contd.)

Author/ Year/ Location	**Purpose of the Study**	**Methodology and Research Design**	**Key Findings**
Porche & Purvin 2008 USA	To investigate supports and constraints related to relationship longevity and how these influence the couples' responses to the option of legal marriage	Life course theory and case study methodology. Recruitment via snowball sampling through gay/lesbian newspapers, community organizations. Semi-structured couple interviews with 4 lesbian and 5 gay same-sex couples who had been together for over 20 years.	Relationship longevity was supported through milestones like property ownership, children, therapy support. Commitment markers may influence decision for legal marriage. Legal marriage seen as a formality to an already established relationship.
Battle & Ashley 2008 USA	Impact of social locations on LGBT families. Seek social and legal equity through politics.	Intersectionality analysis. Concepts of intersectionality and heteronormativity have been used. Research done through review research of Black families and some current concerns of Black LGBT families.	Family is being constructed in many different ways by LGBT people. Benefits of marriage should be provided as part of politics though marriage in itself should not be the goal. Black families face greater violence and discrimination from state sources.
Van Eeden-Moorefield et al 2011 USA	Study on how same-sex couples begin and dissolve relationships	Queer feminist lens used to review demographic and descriptive literature about same-sex couples.	Great diversity exists in same-sex relationships. Lack of research and heteronormative bias means less support to couples during dissolution. Same-sex couples negotiate their relationships differently from heterosexual couples. Chosen family is positively corelated to relationship satisfaction.

Table 1.1 Literature Review on Same-sex Couples (contd.)

Author/ Year/ Location	**Purpose of the Study**	**Methodology and Research Design**	**Key Findings**
Glass & Few-Demo 2011 USA	Study on informal social support for Black lesbian couples	Integrated framework of symbolic interactionism and Black Feminist Theory was used. 11 couples were interviewed.	Black lesbian couples dealt with social invisibility by creating spaces that validate them and limiting access to natal family.
Sappho for Equality 2011 India	To collate experiences of violence and violations. To develop advocacy strategies against violence.	Oral narratives, feminist methodology. Respondents were individual women with non-normative sexuality, LBT persons, LBT intimate spaces and activists.	Overt and covert forms of physical, emotional and sexual violence on persons with non-conforming gender and sexuality is prevalent in private and public spaces.
Pfeffer 2012 USA and Canada	Study that attempts newer conceptualisa-tions of family	50 cis gender women who are with transgender and transsexual men were interviewed. Internet was used to contact participants through purposive sampling.	61 unique partnerships threw light on agency and structure of everyday lives. Most participants were White and educated, 30% were in interracial relationships. Analytical constructs of normative resistance and inventive pragmatism are proposed.

Table 1.1 Literature Review on Same-sex Couples (contd.)

Author/ Year/ Location	**Purpose of the Study**	**Methodology and Research Design**	**Key Findings**
CREA 2012 India, Nepal, Bangladesh	To document violence faced by marginalised women- disabled, sex workers and lesbians.	Multi-country research with women with disability, sex workers and lesbians. Hypothesis that women who were outside of mainstream constructs faced more violence. Qualitative and quantitative methodology. 1600 women participated through survey method. 157 women and 34 service providers interviewed.	Findings for lesbian women revealed that they faced violence because of their sexuality. Erasure of sexuality and having to live a heterosexual life are forms of violence too. Social exclusion, discrimination was common. Fear of violence and stigma resulted in low care seeking.
LABIA 2013 India	Explore gender journeys of persons assigned gender female at birth	50 life history narratives collected from individuals and group discussions with queer and trans collectives. Letters sent to LBT collectives inviting for the study. Queer feminist lens used.	Participants shared nuanced definitions and experiences about their sense of selves, bodies and genders. Violence was an everyday experience because of gender. Study proposes breaking the gender binary and shares recommendations on what different spaces such as education can do.
Whitton et al 2015 USA	To explore whether legal or social formalization of relationships impact commitment and social support	Commitment and social integration theories used. Testing for gender differences done. 604 cohabiting couples for at least 6 months completed online surveys. Study advertised through LGBT organizations and Pride events.	Higher support perceived by those who did social ceremonies, even more than legal ones. Any type of legal or social ceremony may indirectly be associated with higher couple satisfaction due to higher social support.

Table 1.1 Literature Review on Same-sex Couples (contd.)

Author/ Year/ Location	**Purpose of the Study**	**Methodology and Research Design**	**Key Findings**
Mereish & Poteat 2015 USA	Examine impact of minority stress and shame on sexual minority health	Minority stress model, relational cultural theory and structural equation modeling analyses used. Participants recruited through online LGBT listservs. Online data collection tool using survey method. 719 adult participants.	Several models were tested. Hypothesis was proved. Minority stress plays a role in psychological distress.
Saphho 2016 India and UK	Use the concept of "Liveable Lives" and how that plays out in everyday life and can be used for activism	Transnational participatory action research, India and UK. Participants are persons assigned gender female at birth (PAGFB) with non-normative genders and sexualities using a variety of labels. Media reports, project workshops, online survey and 26 in-depth interviews were used for data collection.	Liveability was described in many ways and there was no single consensus of what that means but a range of desires, aspirations, choices, expectations, celebrations and struggles that are both individually and collectively experienced. Violence, invisibility and social stigma have to be continuously negotiated. Social recognition was considered a more important factor for a person's sense of liveability than legal change.
Hammock et al 2018 USA UK	Review of literature of relationship diversity	Extensive research review on queer ways or relating and intimacy, same sex relationships, chosen families, multiple and diverse identities	Proposed a queer paradigm to study relationship diversity using seven axioms based on people's identities, multiple relationships, power, role play, family and possibilities.

Relevance and Attempt of the study

Gaps Identified and Direction Taken from Literature Review

1. Globally, queer intimacies are generally understudied as compared to cis-het intimacies.
2. Globally, theories and models to study intimacies and romantic relationships are drawn from heterosexual lives and are not necessarily adequate.
3. Studies in India have mainly documented human rights violations on queer people and patriarchal violence on queer AFAB persons in particular.
4. Studies and grey literature in India reveal that romantic relationships play a central role in lives and meaning-making of queer AFAB persons but there has not been an in-depth focus to capture these intimate experiences.
5. In the UK and US, there has been a shift towards affirmative practice with queer intimacies through queer-informed frameworks and knowledge, however the same trend is not reflected in mental health work with queer couples in India.

Therefore, we simply do not know enough about queer intimacies. Not enough accurate, authentic knowledge on intimacies of queer AFAB persons, as articulated by those who experience it, exists in academic literature, in mental health curriculum or research in India. This lack of knowledge which is queer-informed has implications on the practitioners' application of their skills (Chakravarty, 2019) to provide responsive therapeutic interventions in couple therapy with queer couples.

Attempt of the Study

In a culture that is predominantly Hindu and caste-based, intimate relationships are not necessarily a result of intimacies between people. They are social projects. There are rules to relating and these have to fit socially constructed categories of caste, community, age, ability, religion, gender and sexuality before an intimate relationship is approved and sanctioned. Relationships, in the form of endogamous marriages are 'arranged' by family elders and matters of family honour trump matters of intimacy. Within this system, AFAB persons are particularly vulnerable if they break the social norms in any way.

CREA (2012) describes the violence meted out “inter-caste marriages are considered transgressive, and the response to them may go as far as honour killings. Marriages between able-bodied individuals and people with disability face opposition” (p. 21). In such a rigid and controlling society, queer AFAB persons are subject to even more violence.

In the Indian context, the societal stigma and policing of sexuality by various institutions especially on queer AFAB persons is rampant. Despite this repression and excessive control, AFAB persons form intimacies with each other. They fall in love, become partners and have romantic/ intimate relationships with each other (Meenu & Shruti, 2012; Sharma, 2006; Sukthankar, 1999). An immense amount of meaning-making, relating and support is in the form of intimate relationships for queer AFAB persons. Research revealed that even when the subject of study is not relationships or intimacies, participants referenced their intimate lives and how important it was for them. “Our respondents spoke at length of their sexual intimacies with others. These relationships were crucial to their lived realities, their sense of self and their understandings of their own gender” (LABIA, 2013, p. 45). Sappho For Equality (2016) in their liveability study describe, “intimate relations proved to be an important pillar in one's liveability (…) romantic sexual relationships prove to be an important companionship in a life otherwise made difficult through non-acceptance, marginalization, discrimination and violation.” (p. 43). Despite such articulations, studies have not explicitly focussed on love and togetherness aspects of intimate relationships of queer AFAB persons. The first attempt of this study is to capture how queer AFAB persons articulate their intimacies within romantic relationships. The focus on positive aspects of intimacies is deliberate and the tone of the study is affirming. The attempt is to add to academic literature as well as queer literature. Given the lack of representation of queer intimacies in mainstream literature, the hope is that queer people too will find this study useful.

In the absence of social sanction and forced secrecy and shame, seeking and maintaining meaningful relationships has particular stressors. Living outside the heteronormative framework usually means a lack of support systems and privileges that are otherwise

accessible to heterosexual people. In India, the queer community and feminist and sexuality rights groups have been the main sites of support for queer people and queer couples in the absence of mainstream mental health support. One of the stumbling blocks in providing mental health support has been a lack of valid and authentic knowledge about queer lives in curriculum and research (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016; Chakravarty, 2019). Knowledge on cis-het intimacies is widely available and practitioners are able to draw on curriculum as well as their own lives to respond to heterosexual couples. Unfortunately, the knowledge on queer intimacies generated in the mainstream is often incomplete, incorrect and harmful knowledge, relying mainly on heterosexual stereotyping of LGBTQI+ people. Sappho For Equality, an organization based in Kolkata, provides peer counselling as well as professional counselling to queer people. This is a very deliberate approach as they intend to create a "bridge between queer and non-queer populations" and providing peer and professional mental health services has greatly benefited their clients. One of the attempts of a recently developed curriculum, Queer Affirmative Counselling Practice Certificate Course (QACP) (2019) is to address this knowledge gap that exists in the mental health field about queer lives (Chakravarty, 2019). These examples show that the mental health system is able to add value to queer lives in very definitive ways when informed by the margins. However, not enough knowledge from the margins exists. The need for practitioners to equip themselves with additional knowledge about queer lives and intimacies is strongly recommended (Chakravarty, 2019; Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016). Therefore, the second attempt of this study is to create knowledge about queer intimacies through this in-depth and focussed exploration. This knowledge can further contribute to developing affirmative therapeutic ways to engage with queer intimacies and couples.

Chapter 2: Methodology

"Methodology is the bridge that brings theory and method, perspective and tool together. It is important to remember that this is a bridge that the researcher travels throughout the research process. In other words, methodology fuses theory and method, serving as a strategic but malleable guide throughout the research experience" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 37). This chapter describes my stand on the nature of reality (ontology), my understanding on how knowledge claims are made and justified (epistemology), what is the role of my values in this study (axiology) and therefore how I go about doing the research (methodology) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It further goes on to make explicit my location as the researcher and the social context in which I place my research subject. These then throw light on the research design, my selection of methods and how I have operationalised my ethical considerations.

Theoretical Frameworks

I believe in multiple subjectivities rather than one objective truth and the 'social construction of reality' which was a term coined by Berger & Luckmann in the year 1966 to refer to ways in which humans understand and make meanings of shared realities (Berger & Luckmann, 2011). I want my research to uphold the multiple realities that emerge as articulated by participants (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, my study employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009) and draws on feminism and queer perspectives (Fernandez & Gomathy, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Shah, Merchant, Mahajan, & Nevatia, 2015) to explore intimacies of queer AFAB persons in their romantic relationships. The social context of intimacies is a hierarchical one (Rubin, 1984) and needs to be examined from a lens that factors in the inequality based on gender and sexuality locations. The three theoretical frameworks that allowed me to explore intimate experiences by locating them in a social context are Feminist, Queer and Standpoint Theories.

Feminist Theory

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) has been a seminal text for feminists. Writings by women like Beauvoir, Gloria Steinem, Kate Millett, bell hooks, Audre Lorde and others raised the question of hierarchy in genders and the social nature of that which was hitherto largely an unquestioned reality. Feminist theorists have been primarily concerned with analysing inequalities and oppression based on gender. Traditionally, feminism has focussed on the category 'woman' and her unequal status in a patriarchal society that privileges men and male dominance.

Feminist research has examined how patriarchy impacts knowledge production. Knowledge is created and controlled by those in power and continues to serve them. "Feminist perspectives were developed as a way to address the concerns and life experiences of women and children, who due to widespread androcentric bias had long been excluded from knowledge construction both as researchers and research subjects" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 27). Positivist research asserted "reality was ordered, rational, and logical" (Reiners, 2012, p.1). A departure from positivist claims to understand reality, feminist researchers have emphasised "centrality of experiences and emotions" and have evolved "alternative methodologies which question the reality" (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010, p. 41). The feminist adage 'the personal is political' has helped shape research approaches to women's realities. In order to understand women's concerns, feminist research had to develop innovative and new methodologies. Feminist research methods focused on agency and co-creation of meanings with those who were experiencing it. Thus, feminist research methods were more collaborative rather than top-down in their attempt to "understand society through the lens of women's experiences" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

Feminism and feminist research have the goal of addressing women's subordination and working towards her empowerment. Though critisised sometimes for an essentialist focus on "woman" (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010), feminist theory's biggest contribution has been "looking at research through a gendered lens" (Jenkins, Narayanaswamy, &

Sweetman, 2019). Through critiquing women's subordination, they have raised important questions on the nature and purpose of various hierarchies. Over the years, several feminisms have emerged and expanded to encompass the diverse realities across social locations such as race, class, caste, ability and sexuality (McCann, 2016). Feminist contributions to research has been to examine power relations and structural oppressions. Thus, using power and power difference as a unit of analysis is feminism's critical contribution to knowledge production.

Queer Theory

Butler (1990) and Halberstam (1998) are regarded the pioneers of queer theory that began to emerge in the 1990s. Queer theory is distinct from traditional feminist understandings of gender as a binary- man/woman and male/female. The use of the term gender itself implies the binary identities of men and women. As feminists and later queer theorists have explored alternative sexual and gender identities, gender has been re-conceptualized as a continuum that encompasses a range of these identities. In their books, Female Masculinity (Halberstam, 1998) and Gender Trouble (Butler, 1999) gender is complicated and the gender binary is dismantled.

Queer theory also questions the notion of heterosexuality as the only normal and conceptualises gender and sexuality as sites of oppression. Struggles within marginalized sexualities have also been about their invisibility within the dominant androcentric, hetero-patriarchal paradigm. A queer standpoint is also mindful of the fact that those on the margins may experience deprivation even at the level of finding language that is adequate to describe themselves and their thoughts. De Ridder, Dhaenens & Van Bauwel (2010) elaborate, "These [queer] theorists reflect a resistance against the discursive power of heteronormativity and underscore the necessity to deconstruct the normative axioms of gender and sexuality" (p. 202). Queer theory critically examines the social norms around sexuality and gender and highlights that the process of knowledge production itself carries the oppression embedded within social structures.

"Queer theory also opens up the possibility of seeing the heteronormative world differently, as well as challenging oppressive structures through a refashioning of what is taken to count within this space." (McCann, 2016, p. 232). One cannot look at either media or popular culture for any means of expression. The idiom of interpretation and language is so obviously heteronormative. Any claim to be inclusive of marginalised identities cannot be done easily because the power structures do not make space for it. Thus, queer theory became a necessary tool to visibilise and lend voice to narratives of lives on the margins. These are not just epistemological issues. These require an ontological shift from two central assumptions that most androcentric, mainstream research has-

1. The world is neatly divided into categories, mainly binary oppositions
2. These dual categories have equal value, like the negative and positive poles of a magnet that be seamlessly and effortlessly neutralized

Queer theory uses a lens that takes into account gender-sexuality as an axis of power. Rubin's "charmed circle" (1984), Warner's coinage of "heteronormativity" (1991), Oswald et al. usage of "queering" (2005) have been some key conceptualisations. "Het [erosexual] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (Sumara and Davis, 1999, p. 202). Thus, queer theory challenges normativity that is held together by cis-gender and heterosexual rules, with biology, heterosexual marriage and reproduction being key aspects in perpetuating oppression. A queer paradigm would then mean a lens to study reality from the perspective of the margins of gender-sexuality. This would bring a perspective shift in knowledge creation by viewing reality from outside the "charmed circle" or the privileged cis-het gaze.

Queer theory is not just about studying the realities of the LGBTQI+ spectrum. Queer is also a political position that challenges the imposition of norms that promote inequality. A queer paradigm when applied to research essentially throws light on oppressive mechanisms. Queerness recognises the links to other forms of oppressions and how they

work in collusion to maintain a variety of hierarchies such as race, caste, ability, capitalism (Ward and Schneider, 2009). Thus, the process of 'queering' would mean deconstructing dominant norms. Queer Theory has the goal of unpacking and deconstructing the ways in which power operates, especially through the control of gender-sexuality.

Standpoint Theory

The main tenet of Standpoint Theory is that in a society that is structured hierarchically, knowledge produced will vary according to our social locations. Dorothy Smith (1974), Nancy Hartsock (1983), Patricia Collins (1986), Donna Haraway (1988) and Sandra Harding (2004) are pioneers of feminist standpoint epistemology. Standpoint theorists have critiqued the notion of valid knowledge as being universal and objective. Haraway (1988) coined the term "situated knowledges" complicating the idea of objectivity and emphasising that knowledge that is created by our locations is valid knowledge. Hesse-Biber et al (2004) write "standpoint theorists explain that a hierarchical society will produce different standpoints or vantage points, from which social life is experienced" (p. 15) and advocate for a "strong reflexivity" as opposed to objectivity. Positivist research, instead of producing 'objective' knowledge, has only produced distortions of the reality by systematically silencing different voices of the less powerful. It is a myth to think that the process of positivist research is completely objective. It follows agendas of political systems and funding organizations and these forces define their purpose and method. Nancy Hartsock (1983) comments "a standpoint is not merely an "interested position" which is then of course interpreted as bias. It is actually involved in the "sense of being engaged." She warns of the deception involved in concealing social relations in research. Engaging with these social relations makes standpoint a liberatory exercise in research. "Strong objectivity" has been coined by Harding (2004). A value-neutral approach to research would only reflect and re-create dominant ideas of knowledge. Harding suggests that starting research from positions of the margins would lend to strengthening objectivity.

Standpoint theory locates the production of knowledge in the oppressed. Knowledge generated from the location of the oppressed will be different from what already exists and asks critical questions of those in power. Thus, it is not just knowledge about the oppressed but knowledge about the ways in which oppression is created and sustained. Thus, standpoint epistemologies "study up" (Harding, 2001). Standpoint theorists state that the production of valid knowledge needs to shift to those who are oppressed.

Queer-Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

The three theoretical frameworks- Feminist, Queer and Standpoint are distinct in some ways but also draw from and inform each other. The commonalities of all three theoretical frameworks are-

1. Their unit of analysis is power/ power difference.
2. They are concerned with social inequalities and oppression.
3. They focus on the oppressed and uphold the importance of knowledge production from that location.
4. Knowledge from the oppressed location is seen as a tool for social justice.

The four points above are demonstrated in how I am approaching this study on the intimacy experiences of queer AFAB persons. This is described below-

1. Intimacy is located within the social context of heteronormativity and body-gender binary which is a hierarchical system.
2. Therefore, the intimacies of queer AFAB persons are pushed to the margins by the norms of gender and sexuality. These intimacies do not become visible because they don't fit the social norms. Or perhaps because the social norms are designed to keep them out.
3. Thus, I am concerned with bringing to light articulations around intimacies from the location of the 'oppressed'.
4. Articulations from the oppressed location can throw up newer ideas on how intimacies are understood.

Given that these are the concerns of my study, I will use queer-feminist standpoint epistemology to conduct this research on intimacies of queer AFAB persons (Achutan et al., 2007; Fernandez & Gomathy, 2003).

A queer-feminist standpoint epistemology is emblematic of the possibilities of inter-connections in methodologies that are from the margins. When one is trying to capture under-represented and misrepresented lives and their stories, methodological 'purity' is something to stay away from because the aim is a well-rounded picture and not one that shaves off parts to fit methodological sanctity. In this study, methodologies were chosen on the basis of certain values, principles and effectiveness. Moreover, the manner in which they are blended throughout the study will show the commitment to the aim and research questions of the study.

Operationalising the Queer-Feminist Standpoint Lens in This Study

This section elaborates upon what a queer-feminist standpoint epistemic lens for this study looks like. What particularly draws me to a queer-feminist standpoint are the articulations on Hierarchy, Context and Reflexivity and these will be demonstrated throughout my study (DeVault, 2004; Harding, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2004; McCann, 2016; Porter, 1999). I also had to think through the following methodological questions. How I engaged with these questions is also demonstrated throughout the study.

1. The subject of study- how does one study a subject that one is close to?
2. The presence of self/ researcher's gaze- how much of oneself does the researcher bring into the research when the subject of study is one that is experienced first-hand? How much of the collective knowledge to which one has access, through membership of a certain group, does the researcher bring into the study?
3. The researcher-participant relationship- how are power and overlaps between participants' and researcher's lives navigated throughout the research process?

The social context in which intimacies are experienced is definitely hierarchical and intimacies that fall outside of the normative are often erased, pushed out and when

described are often incomplete, inaccurate and stigmatizing because the lens used to study them is itself normative (Haraway, 1988). How the margins experience and describe intimacies are likely to be vastly different from the normative. Uma Narayan (2003) writes "no view is neutral" and therefore making explicit the political framing of the phenomenon being studied and one's own location is critical. Doing so lends rigor and integrity to the research through reflexivity and making explicit this connection between knowledge and politics, which is done below.

Locating the Subject of Study

The subject being researched is intimacy. My position is that queer intimacies are marginalised by the axis of gender-sexuality. An important contribution of feminist, queer and standpoint lens has been to identify and name sites of oppression that impact people's lives (Kafer, 2013). For example, patriarchy has been named as a social system which oppresses women's lives in different ways. Gender inequality has been the unit of analysis. For my study, I am situating queer intimacies within the social context of heteronormativity and the body-gender binary which are oppressive social structures. This position is my analytical lens through which data is interpreted. This can be described as the power-marginalization lens. For example, when violence against women is studied from a feminist lens, patriarchy and male domination are recognised and the experience of violence is interpreted keeping that framework intact. Similarly, the subjective experience of intimacy is mediated by certain overarching social norms and I wish to explore and visibilise how queer AFAB persons navigate intimacies in such a context.

My Location(s)

I now delve into making explicit my locations. The following three identities encompass how I view reality and with these what I bring to the research is my political perspective, my lived reality and my therapeutic work.

- a queer-feminist activist
- a queer person, assigned female at birth
- a queer affirmative mental health practitioner (MHP)

I was first introduced to feminism in 2001 as part of my Master's Degree in Social Work at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). It was at the same time that I started realizing that I am not heterosexual. In a quest to understand myself better I stumbled upon two feminist collectives in Bombay- Forum Against Oppression of Women and Stree Sangam (now known as LABIA- a queer-feminist LBT collective). Through these collectives I was introduced to the autonomous women's movement, the queer movements and progressive spaces that shape my politics and perspectives. I situate myself within these queer-feminist politics and my identity as a queer-feminist activist is critical to me.

I am queer (more specifically- butch lesbian) which very simply put is that I have a non-heterosexual sexual orientation and non-heterosexual intimate relationships. Since my political identity (as described above) is queer-feminist, my lived reality also reflects non-normative decisions in intimate relationships and gender expressions that are different from what is otherwise expected from a person assigned gender female at birth. It means that my way to understand realities is to examine the power relations that exist in our social locations, identities and structures. Being assigned gender female at birth as well as being queer, places me at some margins from which to challenge these power hierarchies. It further means that I recognise my own positions of privilege: of being cis-gender, urban, English-educated, able-bodied, Hindu and coming from a savarna (Brahmin) caste background. I am aware of how much power I accrue from these locations.

I am a queer affirmative mental health practitioner. This means that as a practitioner, my politics as well as my lived reality inform my therapeutic values and interventions. My therapeutic practice takes an affirmative stance on sexuality and sexual rights. It takes into account the oppressive nature of heteronormativity and the body-gender binary and the implications on us (Meyer, 2003). Clients who 'transgress' social norms of gender-sexuality experience distress, isolation and shame and this is what comes up in therapy. Discrimination, invisibility, isolation and mental health implications of living and feeling 'differently' need to be addressed in therapy (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2013). My practice

takes all this into account and creates an affirmative space for non-normative realities to be shared. It focuses on helping clients navigate through feelings of internalised stigma and reach a space where they can negotiate a life based on their own terms. I am a trainer and faculty member of Queer Affirmative Counselling Practice Certificate Course[10] and have been part of creating and delivering curriculum that is informed by queer-trans realities and anti-oppressive practice (Burke & Harrison, 1998).

These three identities of mine are important to me and over the years have begun to fit well with each other. Therefore, these three identities are my locations as a researcher too. Over the last seventeen years, I have been part of progressive activist groups. I have the experience of feeling and living as a queer person. I have worked with many clients from a spectrum of sexualities and genders. Thus, what I bring to the research is my perspective, my lived reality and my therapeutic experiences. At the core of these identities is my queer-feminist politics and hence I have employed a queer-feminist standpoint lens to the research. A queer-feminist standpoint lens means situating the analysis of power in the centre of the frame. It is not an equal world when it comes to gender-sexuality. Heteronormativity and the body-gender binary are the dominant narratives that shape intimacies. They carry power. This study is going to capture what lies on the margins of these dominant narratives. It is an attempt to make visible and foreground those voices and therefore this study definitely has a political framework which I draw from my identities of being an activist, a queer AFAB person and an MHP.

Phenomenology or Autoethnography: Methodological Questions

I was interested in studying a phenomenon as experienced subjectively by people. Since these intimacies belonged to a population that was 'invisible', I did want to focus on descriptions and meanings that queer people made for themselves about their intimacies. Hence, phenomenology seemed a suitable research approach because it believes in subjective realities "the naturalistic paradigm, the countermovement of the positivist paradigm, presumed that reality was not fixed but based on individual and subjective

[10] In partnership with Mariwala Health Initiative, Mumbai .https://mhi.org.in/

realities" (Reiners, 2012, p.1). Since I was part of the queer community and had access to a 'hard to reach population', as well as having experience of queer intimacies myself, autoethnography was an equally compelling approach. Autoethnography is "self-focused" and the researcher is in the centre of the research process both as the subject and the object (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Autoethnography's use of the researcher's own narrative as data is quite core to the research process (ibid).

The point to consider was how much of my own intimacies was I going to explicitly examine? One's own life (lived experience) as data is the prominent feature of an autoethnographic study. However, my descriptions of my own intimate experiences and romantic relationships are not being used as data in the study. I had questions about how I would obtain consent from the people I had shared intimacies with, without which I was not comfortable detailing my own experiences. The lens of analysis was not coming from a narrative of the self as it would in autoethnography. My own experiences and my locations have contributed to a political lens and it is this lens that has been used for analysis. My attempt has been to methodologically try and create a lens of analysis and an approach by which qualitative data can be engaged with. Autoethnography requires biography to be used as a method and while I am using identity politics and queer-feminist politics to situate myself, my intention has not been to centre my biography. My strength lay in employing my political locations to create knowledge rather than use my own narrative for knowledge generation.

This was discussed further with my Guide and the Doctoral Advisory Committee (DAC) early on in the research process. It was suggested that since I had the advantage of membership, rich data could be generated using autoethnographic research design tools. I could use participant observation as a tool for data collection given my familiarity with many queer people and couples. This would include me spending time with them in their homes, attending occasions they celebrate and participating in some of their daily routine activities in order to observe their interactions and intimacies with each other, over a considerable length of time. This was considered an opportunity that cis-het researchers are otherwise unlikely to get, given their outsider status and because the subject of study

is so private and personal. However, it was this exact closeness and knowledge about people's lives and the overlapping boundaries and membership that could be considered a barrier to maintaining research ethics. "One of the main features of autoethnography is its emphasis on the self and it is this specific feature that entails the problematic ethical considerations of the method (Ellis, 2007). As a personal narrative is developed, the context and people interacting with the subject start to emerge in the reflexive practice (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). It is at this point when the problem of obtaining or not obtaining consent to be included in the narrative has to be considered (Miller and Bell, 2002)" (Mendez 2014, p. 282). My everyday life and the research process would be very similar. Spending time with queer couples at their homes, celebrating their special occasions, going on outings and holidays with queer friends is already how I live my life. How was I and the participants going to make the distinctions? While not impossible, it would have involved much ethical detailing which was not considered viable by the DAC and the external discussant advising me on my research proposal.

Having said that, there is no doubt of the strong presence of the 'self' in the study. From choosing the subject of study to how the data was collected, analysed and written up, from access to participants to the overlaps between participants' and my own life experiences, all point to an ever-present 'self'. Therefore, finding ethical ways to navigate the presence of self while foregrounding the participant's lives was what informed some of my methodological decisions/ choices. One was the selection of standpoint epistemology, in particular drawing upon queer-feminist politics. The values of standpoint theory, particularly, situatedness and reflexivity, have guided me throughout the research process to maintain its integrity, rigor and consistency. At different points in the study I have made explicit my own intentions, journeys, locations, values and overlaps with research participants. I have detailed out methodology-related dilemmas and ethical considerations. Thus, standpoint became an important space for me to turn to, to resolve ethical and methodological issues.

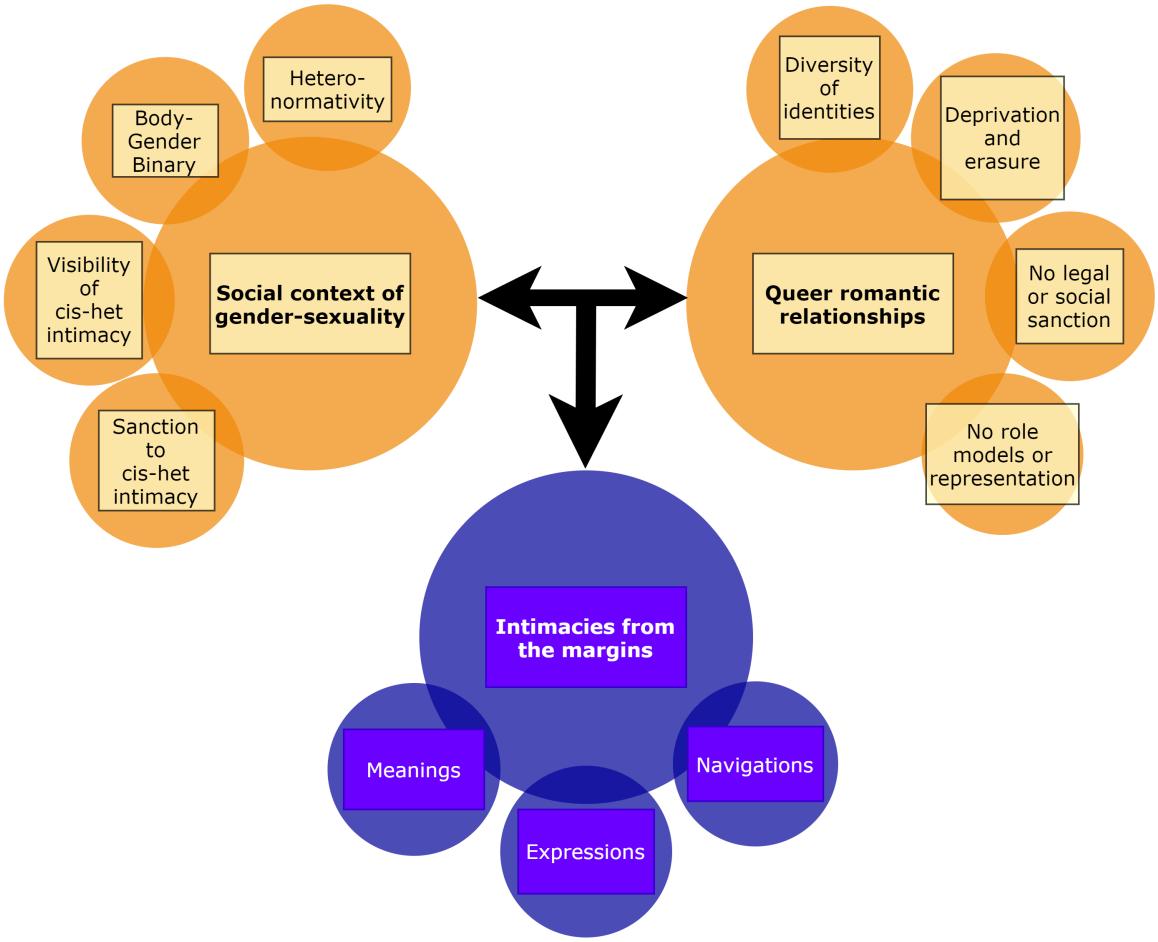
Coming back to the decision of a phenomenological approach. Traditional phenomenology typically recommends keeping the self out of the process and describing

but not interpreting the data of the participants (Reiners, 2012). This would certainly be at odds with the research process given the overlapping subjectivities, knowledges and experiences between me and the participants. Therefore, I have drawn upon Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is "an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography" (Smith et al., 2009, p.11). The aim of IPA is the detailed and nuanced exploration of lived realities, of the "participant's lifeworld" (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA allowed me to explore the meanings that participants hold for themselves while also being able to bring myself and my "situatedness" (Haraway, 1988) into the research and analysis. This embedded nature of the researcher's knowledge about any social reality is acknowledged by IPA Smith et al (2009) write that IPA "emphasised the situated and interpretative quality of our knowledge about the world" (p. 18).

All participants were known to me from before the research began. Plus, I was continuously questioning, how does one study a phenomenon that one is so close to? IPA answered those for me. "The author made it very clear that bias was considered advantageous to the research process, since Heidegger's interpretive philosophy purports that humans are embedded in their world and the researcher cannot and should not negate their prior understanding and engagement in the subject under study" (Reiners, 2012, p.3). With this understanding of IPA and values of queer-feminist standpoint epistemology, I was able to navigate my methodological decisions.

Concept Map

Figure 2.1:
Concept Map



The concept map in Fig 2.1 shows an interaction between the dominant social context of gender-sexuality and marginalised queer romantic relationships. The social context comprises of social norms of heteronormativity and body-gender binary. Cis-het intimacies have benefits such as visibility and legal/social sanction. Queer romantic relationships are impacted by deprivation and erasure, no legal and social sanction and having no role models or representation. There is also diversity of gender and sexuality identities. This interaction shapes queer intimacies in different ways. The study is attempting to capture and visibilise meanings, expressions and navigations of intimacies in queer romantic relationships in a cis-het social context of gender-sexuality.

Research Design

According to Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011) "phenomenology is not only a philosophy but also a research method for capturing the lived experiences of individuals" (p. 19). In phenomenology, one seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. Questions are typically framed thus, "How do individuals experience phenomenon?" My primary curiosity when I set out to do this study was simply this: how do queer AFABs experience and navigate intimacy in their romantic relationships vis-à-vis a cis-heteronormative society?

Alan Bryman (2008) in his book Social Research Methods elaborates that research on examining social reality must be located in people's experience of that reality. Feminist standpoint cannot emphasise more the importance of knowledge production from a particular location (Haraway, 1988). The framing of the research question in this study has to take into account the social reality of intimacies which is this: there is hierarchy and therefore marginalisation on account of gender and sexuality through a set of social norms. This hierarchy obstructs accessibility, visibility and validity of queer intimacies and relationships. Thus, it becomes important to ask and then provide as knowledge the data generated by this question: what are the experiences of intimacy in romantic relationships of queer AFAB persons in a cis-heteronormative society? This question has shaped my research design.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

1. Capture meanings and expressions of intimacy as articulated by queer AFAB persons themselves.

   How are queer AFAB persons describing the love and togetherness they feel for someone?

   How are queer AFAB persons demonstrating intimacy towards each other?

2. Explore the diversity in intimate relationships of queer AFAB persons.

   Where and how do queer AFAB persons seek intimate relationships?

   What labels and scripts are used to describe intimate relationships?

3. Capture articulations of the social context of intimacies as understood by queer AFAB participants themselves.

   What are participants' views on how queer intimacies are viewed by society?

   What are participants' views on how queer intimacies are impacted by society?

Research Site and Selection of Participants

This is a Bombay-based study. All participants are connected to Bombay in different ways. Bombay as the research site was selected because-

1. I am based in Bombay, though I am not originally from here. I have lived here since 2001 and the unfolding of my intimacies, over the years has been in this city.
2. Bombay has a thriving queer-trans community and culture which I have been part of for over fifteen years. Therefore, it offers ease of access to queer participants.

Selection criteria: Participants were invited to be part of the study based on the following inclusion criteria-

1. Participants should have been assigned gender female at birth (AFAB) though their current gender identities could be different from that assignation. There is the question of why AFAB persons? Firstly, let me clarify that AFAB is not a gender identity or location. It is a term that helps us understand how sex and gender is segregated into a binary at birth by being assigned either male or female (Shah, Merchant, Mahajan, & Nevatia, 2015). This is not to generalise that experiences of AFAB persons are similar, growing up. On the contrary, non-conforming children have had varied struggles (Ranade, 2018). In no way am I discounting any of it. However, I felt it was important to account for gender assigned at birth because of the differences in socialization that AFAB persons and AMAB (assigned male at birth) persons receive in a gender unequal world. And therefore, the political decision of foregrounding voices more marginalised which would be AFAB voices. And since I am assigned female at birth, my lived reality led me to choose it. I am aware that I am not including trans identities. Lived realities across the trans spectrum require a

separate exploration for which I do not believe I am prepared or whether it is my place to explore.

2. Participants should identify non-heterosexual (lesbian/ bisexual/ queer/any other labels that they identify and use for themselves).
3. They must be age twenty-one and above. Lower limit for age was twenty-one years to account for sexual identity developmental processes, greater independence perhaps and more articulation around intimacies.
4. They should have been in an intimate relationship for at least two years. They need not currently be in a relationship. The length of two years was selected in order to trace intimacy experiences over a period of time. Ideally, participants should currently be in a relationship in order to participate but insisting on this as inclusion criteria would have meant a loss of data and experiences. It is important to recognise that queer intimate relationships function without legal or social sanction and this has a direct impact on sustaining these relationships (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2013). Forced separations and break-ups are common within the community therefore insisting on interviewing only those who are currently in a relationship would have meant narrowing the pool of participants.

Sampling decisions: In keeping with Standpoint values, I am detailing some decisions and insights regarding sampling and selection of participants-

1. When participants for a study are invited using researcher's own social networks such as Facebook and Bombay-based LBT collectives known to me, there is already a recognition that participants are likely to be similar to me in their social locations (Fernandez & Gomathy, 2003; LABIA, 2013). Having been an activist for over fifteen years, my social networks also reflect like-minded people with similar ideology. Thus, that some participants would have similar politics to me, was a high likelihood.
2. As a member of a queer-feminist collective, I have been involved in managing a phoneline and responding to crisis cases. This has brought me in touch with queer AFAB persons from non-English speaking backgrounds and class/ caste locations different from mine. There was a possibility of inviting them to be a part of the

study but for the reasons below, I did not do so. The sample size would not have been able to bring out the nuances that language, geographical locations, caste and class locations might have on intimacy. “IPA researchers usually try to find a fairly homogeneous sample. The basic logic is that if one is interviewing, for example, six participants, it is not very helpful to think in terms of random or representative sampling. IPA therefore goes in the opposite direction and, through purposive sampling, finds a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 56). The effort would have remained tokenistic, appearing more like a representation of diversity in the sample rather than capturing any real diversity of experiences of intimacy due to these locations. Additionally, my own social locations make me an outsider, speaking on behalf of certain other locations, of which I have no experience.

3. Though this study focuses on intimacies in romantic relationships, the decision was taken to not invite queer couples as a unit, to be part of the study. This decision was taken with extensive inputs from my Doctoral Advisory Committee and the Discussant, at the stage of conceptualising the study. My primary focus was to understand each individual’s meaning-making around intimacy for themselves, in their couplehood and in society. A study to capture couple experiences would have to take into account the co-creation of meanings around intimacy by the dyad. Tools such as couple interviews and perhaps even participant observation to capture couple dynamics and interactions would have to be used. Therefore, the study design and objectives would have been different. I was interested in capturing individual articulations on intimacy where participants reflect on their own ideas, their interactions in their couplehood as well as on the social system around them.
4. My deep interest and involvement in the subject of queer intimacies meant that there were some themes within intimacy which I was aware of and wanted to explore. One such theme was ‘chosen family’. Therefore, using my knowledge of queer lives and people, I identified and invited two participants to add depth to the data around chosen family. “An intensity sample consists of information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely)”

(Patton, 1999, p. 171). "Intensity sampling involves some prior information and considerable judgment" (ibid, p. 172).

Data Collection

Different aspects of the data collection process have been described below.

Developing the data collection tool: A semi-structured interview method was selected for data collection because "it facilitates rapport/empathy, allows a greater flexibility of coverage and allows the interview to go into novel areas, and it tends to produce richer data" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 59). Phenomenology is mainly concerned with understanding the what and how of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, an interview guide with broad, open-ended questions was developed so that data about participants' intimacy experiences could be captured. (appendix 3)

Questions were developed according to the objectives and research questions. Thought was put into how each concept of the study can be operationalised in the interview guide using more general/ layperson terms. For example, intimacy was described using words such as love, togetherness, closeness. To capture objective one, some questions asked participants to reflect on their individual meaning of intimacy and their expectations around it. Another set of questions asked participants to reflect on how they experienced intimacy in an interpersonal context with their partners, for example, how participants expressed themselves with their partner, what did they do to make each other feel special and affirm their togetherness? There were some questions that were framed with the intention of capturing the diversity of romantic relationships. This was captured while exploring intimacy experiences along a relationship trajectory and by capturing labels and scripts that romantic relationships may have. These helped capture objective two. Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked for their comments on cis-heterosexual relationships in order to capture participants' understandings of the social context within which queer intimacies exist. These helped capture objective three. All the questions were open-ended. The interview guide framed the questions such that the

individual, interpersonal and the social experiences of intimacies as articulated by participants could be captured.

A queer-feminist standpoint lens throws light on the oppressions that are inbuilt within language. Often language for the normative is easily available and valued while language to describe the margins is either missing or stigmatised (DeVault, 2004). Therefore, it is important as researchers that we are cognizant of this throughout the research process. DeVault (2004) shares "by speaking in ways that open the boundaries of standard topics, we can create space for respondents to provide accounts rooted in the reality of their lives" (p. 230). I am highlighting this point here to demonstrate how I used it in developing my interview guide. All researchers gather demographic details of the participants, typically- name, age, gender, marital status, socio-economic status, education completed. These are usually expected to be one-word answers. Sexuality is assumed to be heterosexual and hence the question on marital status is asked. Gender is usually either M/F (male or female). Any normative person can quickly give these answers. Yes, they are married/ unmarried/ divorced and find themselves fitting into the socially acceptable categories of Man or Woman. However, when the same set of questions is applied to queer people, it quickly becomes clear that these narrow categories leave no space for diverse realities. Therefore, while developing the questions on demographic details I asked some of the questions differently in order to create space for the participants' lived experiences to be fully reflected.

The following questions were asked and none of these were close-ended with fixed options. The reasons are elaborated below.

Name/ chosen name: _____

Pronouns: _____

Chosen gender label: _____

Chosen sexuality label: _____

Name/ chosen name: Participants may have legal names that are different from the names they choose for themselves. Since names are often gendered, chosen names help reflect gender identities that are authentic to the person.

Pronouns: The same goes for asking which pronouns participants use for themselves.

Chosen gender label: The binary and gendered nature of language may again erase what the felt gender of the participant could be. Therefore, an open-ended question for their gender is asked and it is not assumed that people identify with their assigned gender.

Chosen sexuality label: Non-heterosexual sexualities are diverse and this question too was left open-ended for participants to share how they described themselves.

The use of the words 'chosen' and 'label' in the interview guide leaves space for participants to share the journeys taken to arrive at certain labels for themselves. Breaking the Binary report by LABIA (2013) has elaborated the importance of what a label can mean to each person. The acronym LGBTQI+ itself indicates that labels will keep emerging as we contend with lives on the margins. This open-ended style of asking gave an opportunity for the participants to share more about their gender and sexuality journeys which is elaborated upon in the next chapter.

The first two interviews conducted were initially considered as pilots. However, no changes were made to the tool based on them and their data was used for the final study.

Inviting participants for the study: Participants were invited to participate in the study by publicising the study on my personal Facebook and writing to queer LBT collectives and organizations based in Bombay. It is important to note here that I have direct access to the queer community and LBT spaces where diversities unfold and intimacies are shared. I used my social networks to publicise the study. Therefore, when the invitation to participate was sent out, several queer people already knew me from before. I did not use social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram which are more public to advertise the study to maintain my own safety as a queer person.

The data collection process began when participants contacted me on email after reading the study invitation on my Facebook page (appendix 1). I would then send them the

participant information sheet and the consent form for reviewing (appendix 2). Once I had their written consent on email, we set up a date, time and venue to meet. The venue was decided by the participant. Data collection was conducted either in client's homes or in an office space that I use.

Interview process: Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Though prior consent via the consent form had been taken, once we met, I would again seek verbal consent and audio record their consent. A total of fourteen participants responded to the invitation to participate in the study over a period of two years. Of these, four interviews did not take place either because of participants withdrawing or logistical constraints. A total of ten participants were interviewed once. All interviews except the last one were conducted face to face. The final interview had to be conducted over the phone due to physical restrictions on movements because of the Covid 19 pandemic. Interviews lasted an average of two hours.

The interview was free-flowing, asking questions from the interview guide in an open-ended manner. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences. Participants chose which intimate relationship they wished to speak about. I would ask them to share about a significant romantic relationship. This gave the participants the option to choose whether they would like to talk about their current relationship, or their first one or their longest relationship or a significant past relationship or any other that they considered significant. There was some initial focus on a timeline to ease participants into the interview by asking them to narrate how they had met the person they wanted to talk about. After that, however, focus was more on capturing memories and descriptions that participants wished to share and linearity was not followed. Interviews were conducted primarily in English with a mix of Hindi/ Marathi as per the participant's comfort.

Facilitating conversations on intimacy: Questions were asked in a manner that helped operationalise the concept of intimacy that was being studied. Questions were framed using more popular terms such as love, togetherness, showing each other that they are special and what makes them feel close to each other. Participants were asked how they knew they were attracted to someone, how they showed the other person that they were

interested. Questions that explored relationship diversity were also operationalised in a more conversational manner such as is there an ideal relationship that you would like to replicate, what living arrangements exist, how do you affirm your togetherness? Questions around larger social context were asked by requesting participants to share their thoughts on heterosexual relationships and the society around them.

Being a queer person myself with non-normative experiences of intimate relationships, I was able to connect and validate the experiences of the participants throughout the interview process. This 'insider' (Collins, 1986) position definitely facilitated frank sharing from participants. Moreover, the participants did not have to explain to me how 'valid' they and their stories are. I just got it because of my own experiences. When the only model we know of doing intimacies is a man-woman one, picking up on and validating the nuances of intimacies shared by participants was facilitated through my own process of unlearning the gendered nature of intimacies, over the years. Additionally, I was able to employ my therapeutic skills in the interview process. The familiarity that I have with working with emotional content in an open, empathetic manner with a focus on agency and wellbeing of the person, came in handy during the interview process. Taking a listening stance, expressing interest in the person's sharing and authentically validating their experiences are therapeutic tools that contributed to a safe environment for the participant (Joshi, 2019). Thus, my own queerness and my skills as a therapist played a key role in the co-creation of this knowledge on queer intimacies.

Data Analysis

I have relied on data analysis steps that are outlined by Smith & Osborn (2008) in their chapter Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods. And I have continued to approach these steps keeping every bit of my queerness and my queer-feminist lens into the analysis thus employing the standpoint approach (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004).

Central to the process of analysis is the participant's meaning "the aim is to try to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their

frequency" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 66). I wanted to capture in as much detail, what participants had to say about their meanings and expressions of intimacy. Therefore, I read each transcript repeatedly since "each reading has the potential to throw up new insights" (ibid, p. 67). The initial notes were developed based on the questions asked in the interview guide. For example, participants were asked to define what intimacy meant to them. As I read the transcripts I began to note and collate answers to this question as shared by participants. From these notes, emerged themes, within and across the interviews. The next step was to look at the connections between themes. As I read through the transcripts repeatedly, certain commonalities across transcripts and new themes began to emerge. For example, intimacy experiences of the participants' experiences followed a trajectory of how the romantic relationship began to where they were at, in the relationship now, though this was not necessarily evident in a linear manner in their narration. I made notes of the descriptions of how intimacy was expressed in the couplehood. There was diversity and uniqueness amongst the participants in how they did their relationships. So that was another strand of analysis. Having experienced and understood queerness from a power-marginalisation lens, my lens for analysis continued to locate experiences within the broader framework of the unequal structure of heteronormativity and body-gender binary. Therefore, I looked within the data, for experiences that described a certain 'difference' from the expected social norms. These were also noted as per the participants' narratives. One strand of analysis was bringing to light the paradoxes that exist in queer people's lives especially because of living a queer life in a heterosexual world. This dialectic lens (Winnicott, 1973) was applied to make apparent the ways in which queer people achieve fulfilling intimacies. These emerging and connecting themes were then clustered as follows;

1. Meaning of intimacy for the participants
2. Impact of the social structure on intimacies
3. Experiences of intimacy in the couple relationship
4. Experiences of intimacy that were different from the expected norms

My analysis of the data was not restricted to the data that emerged from the transcripts alone. The analysis was also informed by my own lived realities as well as the knowledge

that exists in queer circles about intimacies. The queer community is a small and overlapping one. My own life stories are part of collective queer narratives. So are the narratives of several other queer people. That is how queer knowledge is built. When queers exist in a context of erasure and deprivation, our own lives become sources of knowledge. This is collectively collated and shared and passed around. Therefore, the participant knew about my life and I knew the participant's life outside of this study. This study focused on intimacy and this too is collective knowledge. This collective knowledge was definitely present in the interview process, within which the participant's story was privileged. Therefore, it was necessary to draw on standpoint epistemology since "knowledge is socially situated" (Haraway, 1988) and I am socially situated. And my social locations have played a role on how the study was conceptualised, conducted, analysed and written up.

Data Presentation and Data Validity

This section describes my engagement with the data and decisions around it.

Foregrounding participant voices: After the interview process was completed, the audio recordings were transcribed by me and the transcripts were considered final only once the participant had reviewed them and sent an approved transcript on email. In this study, I have attempted to foreground themes using participants' voices/words in as much detail as possible. This is a deliberate decision. These are voices on the margins, these experiences are often not incorporated into mainstream understandings of intimacies. Therefore, I wanted to foreground the actual voices. I have used several descriptions from their transcripts to narrate their stories: participant snapshots, intimacy snapshots, verbatim phrases and longer block quotes. I have sometimes combined two-three quotes to capture a fuller sense of what the participant is describing. I have included sections that describe different intimate experiences of the participants. At different points during the analysis, I have checked with participants, if my interpretation and presentation of data on parts of their stories was okay by them or not. Participants were requested, if they wished to do so, to give me feedback on the interview process, questions asked and any

ideas on how they felt these concepts could be captured. Thus, there was an attempt to involve participants and co-create this knowledge on queer intimacies.

Accessibility of knowledge: Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I was concerned with making the data and knowledge accessible and authentic. I wondered if the queer content of this study would be understood in ways that I was trying to write it? My constant worry was, "Will people get it?" This, I have to admit, is a queer worry and continues to be one. Language and representation of queerness is so lacking that I had to work hard at trying to make it graspable. On the other hand, I assumed too much about queerness and queer lives because it was so familiar to me. I would miss out on detailing nuances. I was also concerned about how to write politically about love; how to retain the affect and politics of queer intimacy. Thus, these struggles on how much to write, how to write it and how to make it accessible without simplifying the complexity of queer people's lives was one I constantly navigated.

Validity of knowledge: This is also a point of reflection: which knowledge is considered valid knowledge? For too long, queer sexuality and therefore queer intimacies have been framed by the norm of heteronormativity. It is often incomplete, incorrect and harmful knowledge. Very little knowledge exists that represents the realities of LGBTQI+ communities in valid and authentic ways. This study is an attempt to foreground knowledge from the margins. It is knowledge generated by queer people. Knowledge drawn from queer lives, from queer politics and resistance. It is knowledge based on queer lived realities and felt experiences. "However even with their claims of neutrality, lack of bias and objectivity, these studies were motivated in certain core beliefs - those which considered homosexuality to be unnatural, pathological and sinful and those that considered heterosexuality to be a normal, natural aspect of human sexuality. Thus the claim of positivist research to objective, universal (acontextual) evidence needs to be questioned in favor of more situated and subjective knowledge" (Ranade, 2015). Therefore, retaining the participants' voices and narratives in as much detail as possible and involving them at different points in the study is a deliberate attempt at creating valid knowledge that is collective, experiential, situated and subjective.

Ethical Considerations

I have drawn upon my queer-feminist values to think through and operationalise my ethics throughout the study (Porter, 1999).

Overlapping, Multiple and Shared Membership

An important ethical consideration was my overlapping locations as a queer person, activist and MHP. I already have to navigate overlapping boundaries of me as a queer person and me as a practitioner who has queer clients (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2013). I share this upfront with my queer clients. I lay down my identities and talk about how I may meet them outside of the counselling space in queer events. I go over confidentiality and what boundaries to set so that the client feels safe. I employed the same with the participants. And at all points, the feminist values of upholding agency and personhood was demonstrated-

1. The participant information sheet and consent form clearly stated my locations and requested participants to discuss with me how to make the process safe for them. Thus, I made explicit all my identities and how they overlap and how they intersect with participants.
2. It is important to note here that all the participants were known to me. Some were acquaintances from the queer community in Bombay, some were friends, some were colleagues, some I would call political allies and some felt closer than friends because of years of association. Therefore, the participant information sheet and consent form explicitly stated my intent to make this process safe for participants given that our lives intersect and overlap in different ways.
3. A certain level of trust was already established between each participant and me because of prior equations. However, at no point did I take the trust for granted. The participant information sheet and consent form were shared in advance. Before starting the interview, I asked if they wanted to go over it with me. Consent was taken to audio record interviews. During the process of the interview, I would check how they were feeling or whether we needed to take a break. Nothing was assumed simply because of an already existing equation with the participant.

Researcher Power and Reflexivity

It is critical that I be aware of the power I carry in my various locations. I have been in the queer community for over fifteen years. Most of my work for the last seventeen years has been in the area of gender and sexuality. I have had my own independent practice since 2010. This means I have been engaging with queer lived realities and queer politics for nearly two decades. The participants were familiar with my life as I was with theirs already. I had to ensure that they feel safe sharing the information that they do. This meant that self-disclosure was an important strategy to minimize the power without overshadowing the participant's narrative.

I had to consider if this access and prior knowledge may influence participants to participate or share only particular types of information. This was considered carefully and discussed with participants. Participants should not feel obliged to be part of the study simply because they know me. This was stated clearly and reiterated at all points of the study.

Confidentiality, Anonymity and Informed Consent

Confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent becomes even more crucial given the intersecting locations, spaces and prior knowledge of participants' lives (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2013). I have taken every precaution to do that. Despite that, participants are aware that even with the anonymising of names and other identifying details, their stories can still be connected back to them by those who know them. This is because queer intimacies are collectively built and shared in a small and overlapping community. Despite this, participants have agreed to share their lives and for that I am deeply grateful.

Right to the Data and Right to Exit Study

Participants have every right to the information that they shared in the form of their transcript and the study itself. It is stated clearly in the participant information sheet and consent form that participants will have access to the final thesis. Each participant has been given their transcripts. Participants had the right to make changes in their transcript

at any point till the publication of this study. I was in touch with participants beyond the data collection process in order to co-develop how they would like to be represented in the study. For example, the brief profiles and intimacy snapshots of the participants were sent to them for their approval and all changes suggested by them were incorporated.

Participants had the right to exit the study or request information to be deleted or withheld at any point during the course of the study. Participants will be invited to give suggestions on how they feel the study can be used or disseminated after the formal PhD process has been completed.

Benefits and Risks

Participants did not materially benefit from this study nor were they compensated monetarily for their time or contribution. I did try to ensure that financial cost to the participants was minimum such as travel costs. I was willing to travel to the locations/ spaces that participants were most comfortable in. Some participants may have benefitted emotionally from the interview process. I did receive feedback from some of them about the opportunity to speak unhindered about their intimate relationships, an opportunity otherwise rare for queer people. This helped them with reflecting on their intimacies and feeling validated about what they share/d with someone in an intimate space.

I was aware that the nature of the questions could bring up painful memories and cause distress hence counselling services were made accessible by putting details down in the participant information sheet. I was not available in the capacity of a counsellor to participants in the course of this study but the iCall telephone helpline details were provided. This is a free service. The names of counsellors who do face to face sessions were provided to all participants. I ensured that the names of the counsellors shared were known within the queer community to be queer affirmative. I chose the iCall helpline as a resource for the same reason. I tried to ensure that the counsellors were located in different parts of Bombay given how vast the city is. Participants could access my Guide directly in case they had any queries or complaints that they could not bring to me.

Limitations of the Study

The study focused on individual meanings of intimacies only. Given the interpersonal nature of intimacies, a research design that focuses on couples and the co-creation of meanings on intimacies would bring newer dimensions to the data. The study site was limited to one city and public social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram were not used to publicize the study. This restricted the number of participants who knew about the study and volunteered to be part of it. The invitation to participate was circulated only through known networks and this resulted in similarity of class/caste locations across participants.

Way Ahead

The next four chapters focus on the findings of this research study. I have attempted to lay them out in a manner such that the participants' lives and intimacies slowly unfold for the reader. Chapter Three describes not just the participants' demographic details but their journeys with gender and sexuality, their coming out stories and the contexts of their romantic relationships. This introduction to 'who the participant is' helps grasps their intimacies in fuller depth in later chapters. Chapter Four attempts to describe what the participants have to say broadly/ in general about their definitions of intimacy while also commenting on how these intimate experiences are impacted by a society that doesn't 'allow' them. This helps make the connections between the personal and the social as experienced by participants. It provides the reader insights into how inequality get played out in everyday life. Chapter Five provides a rich and nuanced insight into queer intimate experiences in a romantic relationship. The everyday expressions of love and togetherness are captured in detail. The chapter describes lived realities and felt experiences of intimacy across four stages of a romantic relationship. Chapter Six attempts to throw light on how queer intimacies engage with dominant norms of intimacies.

Thus, these four chapters help the reader journey with the participants on who they are, what intimacies mean to them at an individual level, how they express their togetherness interpersonally in a relationship and how they navigate their intimacies in an unequal society.

Chapter 3: Introducing the Participants

It is common for queer people to feel quite invisible in a largely heterosexual world. **"**But what an effort it was for us [lesbians] to convince ourselves of our own existence, let alone others" (Sukthankar, 1999). Moreover, their meanings and realities of themselves find no reflection in the mainstream. "(....) since the words available often do not fit, women learn to "translate" when they talk about their experiences. As they do so parts of their lives "disappear" because they are not included in the language of the account" (DeVault, 2004, p. 233). As emphasised in this quote, lives on the margins often do not find a language to express themselves because language itself has not accounted for their lived experiences. Hence the need for this chapter. As seen in the previous chapter, a deliberate decision was made to keep questions about name, pronoun, gender and sexuality, open-ended in the interview tool. This helped capture nuances about participants' lives that are described in this chapter. All studies are expected to share details of the participants, especially demographic details. These are typically included at the end of the methodology chapter. However, when we talk of lives on the margins, we need to give it much more space than that. This chapter shares demographic details of participants, describes their gender and sexuality labels and contains a section on 'Snapshot of the Participant's Life' which describes the coming out stories and circumstances within which their romantic relationships are based. There are two reasons why I have a separate chapter to introduce participants to the readers-

1. To give space to participants to share about their gender and sexuality locations which while not being the focus of the study, is intricately linked to their sense of themselves and their intimacies.
2. To give an insight to the reader about the richness and complexity of the participants' lives. When someone falls out of the mainstream, our understanding of them is very narrow, mainly based on stereotypes. LGBTQI+ descriptions are often reduced to thin descriptions when in reality people's lives are quite diverse and layered.

Participant Names

Most names have been anonymised for confidentiality purposes. Two participants did not wish their names to be anonymised. Participants chose names for themselves or we came up with a name together. This collaborative manner of selecting a pseudonym was crucial to do, so that names used in the study could continue to reflect the identities of the participants, particularly gender identities (LABIA, 2013). For example, Tej and Manu chose pseudonyms that continued to convey their non-binary gender identity. Some preferred to use their initials. One participant shared that by choosing another name, it would feel like it was someone else's story and that would take away from the authenticity of the intensity. Therefore, she retained her initials G and her girlfriend's initials P for the study. The names of all the participants is listed in Table 3.1.

Participant Demographic Details

All participants are Hindu, Savarna, English speaking and from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds. Participants are between the ages of twenty-nine to forty-seven. All participants have completed a Bachelor or Master's degree. One participant has completed her MPhil degree and another participant is currently pursuing a PhD degree. Monthly income ranges from INR 20,000 to INR 5,00,000. Some participants have financial support from their parents. Participants come from a variety of professional backgrounds: NGO sector, mental health field, museum/ conservation work, engineering and graphic design. Three participants are self-employed having their own business or joined the family business. Two participants went back to study and are not currently earning. All participants are in touch with the queer community and connected to the city of Bombay in different ways- either live here, or grew up here, or found love here or found queer community here. Table 3.1 highlights the name, age, educational background, profession and monthly income of each participant.

Table 3.1 Demographic Details of Participants

Name	**Age**	**Education**	**Profession**	**Monthly Income (INR)**
Aisha	29	Double Bachelor of Arts Degree	Museum/conservation work, queer mental health activist	1,00,000
Ananya	33	Master's Degree	Entrepreneur	20,000
Arti	35	MPhil, PG Diploma in Counselling	Psychotherapist, trainer	40,000
Bonnie	30	Master's Degree	Currently a student again	Not earning currently
G	47	MBA, MS in Counselling and Psychotherapy	Counsellor, trainer	1,50,000
Manu	33	Engineering and Masters in Computer Science; currently pursuing PhD	Software engineer	USD 2000 (student stipend)
Namrata	32	MBA Marketing	Family business	Did not share
Sap	46	Diploma in Applied Art	Graphic designer, artist	Did not share
SC	42	B Pharma	NGO sector	Did not share
Tej	39	MBA	Self-employed professional	5,00,000

Since participants responded to an invite put out privately on Facebook and sent to queer groups known to me within the city of Bombay, diversity in the sample across caste, class, ability has not emerged. This is probably a larger reflection of who has access to queer spaces as well as online queer spaces. This is also a reflection of my own social locations. I access certain queer social spaces that has queer people similar to my social locations- Hindu, Savarna, urban, English educated, middle-class. Nearly half the participants belonged to a queer-feminist collective and so their political articulations are similar to mine. This similarity in demographic background of participants coincides with other studies done with hard to reach populations or where participant selection relied on researcher's own queer networks (Fernandez & Gomathy, 2003; LABIA, 2013; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2006). Tej, one of the participants, pointed out that another reason for this similarity could be the two-year criteria for length of relationships. Sustaining longer queer relationships requires a sense of stability about oneself in a very hostile environment. Having class/ class privileges, access to queer community and queer politics all contribute to stability for self and relationship. Thus, many queer people may not have experienced relationships longer than two years. Bonnie shared that limiting the study to one city had further narrowed the pool of participants. These insights from participants were shared when at the end of the interview, I would ask them for feedback and suggestions.

Participant Gender and Sexuality Labels

The homogenous nature of the sample ended with their class/ caste locations. The gender and sexuality labels of the participants indicate diversity. Of the ten participants, two participants identify non-binary, two identify gender-queer, one identifies agender and five identify cis-gender. The five cis-gender participants have used female, woman, cis-woman, gender conforming cis-woman and cis-ish AFAB to describe their gender labels. In terms of sexuality labels, participants have used queer, lesbian, bisexual, femme lesbian, kinky and queer, asexual queer or attracted to women to describe themselves. If I am not heterosexual and I 'transgress' gender norms in different ways then what do I call myself? It is important to highlight the journeys of labelling that people on the margins

often go through. I had asked both these questions in an open-ended manner without providing any options from the LGBTQI+ acronym. This was deliberate so as to capture the meaning that participant's give about themselves in these identities. Arti, shares that her sexuality label is lesbian, more specifically femme lesbian. And her gender label is cis-woman and gender conforming in terms of appearance. These descriptions indicate an interaction with mainstream norms of gender-sexuality and hence the naming is so specific. G uses the label bisexual but quickly adds the word currently after it. This indicates that she believes that there are still possibilities for where her sexuality explorations might take her. And though the focus of this study was not to explore these journeys, each label that was shared had most likely been arrived at slowly and deliberately (Shah, Merchant, Mahajan, and Nevatia, 2015). These labels are meaning-heavy as they describe realities that otherwise go unnamed.

It is important to declare here that participants have consented to me using AFAB as a general description for a person's birth assigned gender. This is not a gender identity and label unless specifically used by a participant. All participants were assigned female at birth (AFAB) though their gender journeys have been very different and gender labels used for self are varied too. Table 3.2 is indicative of the diversity of meaning and experiences within the queer-trans community. In order to uphold this diversity and the effort that goes into arriving here, I have put the words down in Table 3.2 exactly as they were shared by participants. For example, Aisha says she is cis-ish AFAB. This indicates that she does identify to some degree with the gender assigned to her at birth which was female, though her identification with the assignation is not that strong, perhaps. The labels are indicative of the fact that mainstream norms and language of gender-sexuality do not have enough space for naming realities of the margins. An insistence on neat-fitting labels is nothing but erasure.

Table 3.2 Gender and Sexuality Labels of Participants

Name	**Gender**	**Sexuality**
Aisha	Cis-ish AFAB	Queer
Ananya	Female	Lesbian
Arti	Cis-woman, gender conforming in terms of appearance	Lesbian, more specifically femme lesbian
Bonnie	Queer or gender-queer, I use it interchangeably	Kinky and queer
G	Cis-woman	Bisexual (currently)
Manu	Non-binary	Attracted to women, queer
Namrata	Woman	Lesbian
Sap	Agender	Asexual Queer
SC	Gender-queer	Difficult to answer. Just use queer.
Tej	Non-binary	Queer

Pronouns

I was particular about using pronouns that the participants used for themselves and their partners. Language limits pronouns to only two genders. This may not be the experience of the participants. Three participants have used the pronoun 'they' for self. Seven participants use the pronoun 'she' for self.

Participant Relationship Status

Seven of the ten participants spoke about the relationship they were currently in. One participant spoke about her current relationship and as well as an intimate equation she shares with someone else. One other participant described their relationship as asexual. Three participants spoke about a previous significant relationship. Participants who were aged twenty-nine and thirty years were with older partners with age differences of ten and twelve years between, respectively. Other participants were similar in age to their partners or had up to five years age gap between them and their partners. For most participants, the relationship they described in the study was not their first one. Thus, the age of finding a partner varied. Many participants found more permanent partners in their thirties. For most, their first relationship had often led to exploring one's sexuality and gender but the struggles around those often took a toll on their romantic relationships. The length of most relationships was currently at five years. One couple has completed twenty-eight years. Being able to invest in longer term relationships only around mid-thirties is also an indication of the struggles with gender-sexuality in early adulthood. Participants had been able to find queer community, been able to negotiate with families and move towards self-acceptance of their gender and sexuality to a greater degree only in their thirties. This had helped with how they were able to navigate intimacies in their romantic relationships. Coming from middle and upper-middle class, English-educated and savarna backgrounds offered the participants certain privileges of livelihood and income which contributed to their own stability and therefore helped in stabilising their couplehood.

Snapshot of the Participant's Life

This section gives a brief context about the participants: their coming out stories, their identity labels and the circumstances of their lives within which their romantic relationships exist. This is important to share as the richness of queer people's lives is often lost under the narrow stereotyping that exists in mainstream society about them. It is also important to know these details for a fuller grasp of their intimacies in later chapters.

Participant 1- Ananya

At the time of the interview, Ananya was 33 years old. She identifies female and lesbian and uses the pronoun she/her. She is an entrepreneur and her monthly income is INR 20,000/-

Ananya knew of her sexuality when her teachers did a very personalized and progressive sex education talk in ninth grade. That's when she realised all those strong emotional feelings, she had for many women in her life were more than just a need for strong female friendships. Three years after that she was in her first relationship ever and the first one with a woman. After four long years in that relationship she decided to explore her little crush on men, to see if she was bisexual and could avoid the many hardships of living a homosexual life in her society and country. Alas, that wasn't meant to be! She was and is totally and only attracted to women.

Ananya and Sharmila were colleagues at work when they met. Sharmila was married to a cis-het man when she fell in love with Ananya. Even before Ananya and Sharmila could fully grasp what they meant to each other, Sharmila left the country with her husband. However, their love for each other continued to grow even across the distance. For the entire duration of the five years, Ananya and Sharmila lived in different countries, meeting for only a few weeks, every couple of years. They used to be online with each other practically every day. Through it all Ananya never doubted Sharmila's love for her but realised that the circumstances of Sharmila's marital life were never going to let her

and Sharmila be a couple. These circumstances are what brought their relationship to an end.

Participant 2- Namrata

Namrata was 32 at the time of the interview. She identifies woman and lesbian and uses the pronoun she/her. She works in her family business. She did not wish to share her income details.

As early as age eight, Namrata realised she was different but did not know the term lesbian until years later when the film 'Fire'[11] was released.

In the interview, Namrata shares about her relationship with a bisexual woman. Namrata was about twenty-six when she met her girlfriend who was about twenty-one. Their relationship lasted almost three years. Namrata outlines how they met and how the relationship moved forward. She shares candidly about the couple rituals they shared and how they spent time with each other and participated in each other's life. They described each other as girlfriends, told some friends and family members and described their relationship as exclusive, monogamous and committed.

Participant 3- G

G was 47 years old at the time of the interview. She identifies cis-woman and bisexual and uses the pronoun she/her. She is a counsellor, trainer, consumer researcher and her monthly income is 1.5 lakhs per month.

G knew of her sexuality from a very young age, even before she had reached 7th std in school. She had had some intimate experiences with female friends and cousins till her 7th std. But after that she wasn't able to. G says she has always known that she is attracted to women but never quite got the chance to express her sexuality. G is in a heterosexual

[11] Fire was released in metro city theatres towards the end of 1998. It depicts a love story between two Indian (Hindu) married women.

marriage with N. She married in her mid-twenties. She has a daughter who is a teenager now.

G was in her mid-thirties when she fell in love with a woman, P, in her neighbourhood. P was also in a heterosexual marriage and had two daughters. Their love was intense and it was like meeting a soul mate. For almost three to four years, G and P were able to be in a relationship, syncing their lives in every possible way. They had imagined growing old together. However, their plans were disrupted when P's husband accidently discovered their relationship. Now G and P are not in a relationship but they continue to be in each other's life. The families know each other and so do the children and they all continue to meet. It has now been ten years since they first met.

Participant 4- Aisha

Aisha was 29 years old at the time of the interview. She identifies cis-ish AFAB and queer and uses the pronoun she/her. She does museum/conservation work, and is a queer mental health activist. Her monthly income is one lakh.

Aisha knew of her sexuality, upon reflection, always, though the ability to articulate sexual orientation and identity was around fifteen to seventeen years of age. She recognizes that her experience of childhood was rather queer, an awareness of being 'different' or 'other' that didn't quite yet have the words to express itself. Her first crush on another girl at age fifteen made her look for articulations, which then led to searching for queer community and politics in order to understand herself.

Aisha has been in a relationship for over four years now with someone who identifies non-binary and is ten years older than her. Aisha lives in two cities and when she is in Bombay she lives with her partner. She describes the relationship to be committed, monogamous and long term and they have exchanged rings as a marker of their togetherness.

Participant 5- Manu

Manu was 34 years old at the time of the interview. Manu identifies non-binary and is very certain of their attractions to woman-identified people only. Manu uses the pronoun they/them. Manu is currently a student again and living abroad. They had been visiting their family in Bombay when this interview was held.

Manu knew of their sexuality pretty early on but didn't realize that it was not the norm; many classmates had crushes on female-presenting students and teachers. Around age thirteen, however, Manu continued to be attracted to women while their classmates' attention shifted to cis-men. They dated a woman during the last two years of high school and this helped confirm their sexuality.

They are currently in a relationship that is about a year-long and contains a depth of intimacies and new experiences within it. While Manu is originally from Bombay, this current relationship is based abroad in the US where they are pursuing a PhD degree.

Participant 6- SC

SC was 42 at the time of the interview. SC identifies queer and gender-queer and uses the pronoun she/her. SC works in an NGO and did not wish to share her monthly income.

SC knew of her sexuality at age sixteen when she was in junior college and she had strong feelings for another girl, who she was in a brief relationship with. SC has had crushes and feelings for women but she didn't act on them, as most were heterosexual women who were usually in a different relationship. Since she thought of herself to be bisexual, she struggled to come to terms with her feelings about marriage and her inability to express feelings for women. She was in a heterosexual marriage which did not last long, after which she met with her current partner.

SC talks about her relationship of five years. Coincidentally, the date of the interview was actually her fifth anniversary with her partner! SC shares that her relationship has seen living together as well as long distance settings. The two of them are so unalike that their

relationship had to constantly account for these differences. Currently, they are living together in Delhi.

Participant 7- Bonnie

Bonnie was 30 years old at the time of the interview. She identifies kinky and queer and her gender label is gender-queer or queer as she uses it interchangeably. The pronoun used is she/her. She is currently a student again. She is in a relationship and also in an intimate equation with another person.

Bonnie was always attracted to women and never felt otherwise. In her teens too she was clearly attracted to older women. There was only one man she found charming in childhood because of the way he spoke and explained things. He was the Director of her father's theatre group. She wasn't sure if it was sexual attraction but it was definitely something special. In her late teens, she figured that liking a boy for a girl is the way of the world. It is only then that she felt disconnected with the reality of her desire.

In this study, Bonnie talks about the stability and domesticity of a relationship that she has had for five years now with someone who is twelve years older than her. She describes their ups and downs and what continues to keep them together. Bonnie also talks about an intimate equation she shares with another AFAB person. She describes it as adventurous and kinky. She is uncertain about how it will pan out which is what adds to the charge!

Participant 8- Arti

Arti was 35 years old at the time of the interview. She identifies as a gender conforming cis-woman and lesbian, more specifically femme lesbian and uses the pronoun she/her. She is a mental health practitioner and trainer and her monthly income is INR 40,000/-

When Arti was a teenager, she had some explorations with girls her age. Her first relationship with a woman was at age twenty-three but when that did not last Arti entered into a heterosexual marriage. What contributed to this decision was also her gender expression which being feminine and therefore gender conforming made her question if

she was ‘really lesbian’. After about five years in a heterosexual marriage, Arti ventured into the queer community again and it was in her early thirties that she fully began to embrace her lesbian sexuality.

Arti is in a relationship with a butch-identified lesbian cis-woman for the last two years. This is not her first relationship but she hopes this will be her last. She describes the relationship as having a certain permanence to it and growing old together with her life-partner.

Participant 9- Tej

Tej was 39 years old at the time of the interview. They identify as queer and non-binary and use pronouns they/them. They are a self-employed professional and their monthly income is five lakhs.

Tej felt like they were a boy throughout childhood and so when they felt attracted to girls it was normal. As young as age eight, they remember being attracted to Dimple. Later on, due to multiple factors, they decided to accept the body they were born in and so then after years of struggle starting seeing women in their early twenties. It was not until their mid-thirties that they began to articulate their felt gender and then felt more comfortable with their queer sexuality too.

In this study, Tej talks about their five-year long relationship with someone who they consider, “out of their league.” Tej describes how the relationship has been deeply affirming with respect to their gender as well as kink. They also throw light on how the relationship navigates mental health concerns of both partners.

Participant 10- Sap

Sap was 46 years old at the time of the interview. Sap identifies as asexual queer and agender and use the pronoun they/them. They are a graphics designer and artist. They did not share their monthly income.

Sap fell in love with a woman in their college at around age seventeen. At that time in 1992, they had no idea about gender and sexuality but both knew that they were in love and committed to each other. For almost sixteen years, they thought that they were the only couple like themselves. It was in 2008 when they first met some queer people via Facebook. After that they had more access to language to describe their sexuality, gender and couplehood.

In the study, Sap shares about their twenty-eight year long, queer romantic relationship. This is an intimate relationship that does not involve sexual intimacy. For Sap, it was like love at first sight. Sap and Neel feel a deep connection and commitment towards each other. Coincidently, their relationship had completed exactly twenty-eight years just one day before the interview took place!

This chapter provided demographic details as well as snapshots into lives of the ten participants. A detailed description of participants' lives is important to give a sense of their journeys with gender and sexuality and the circumstances of their lives. These nuances are often erased due to mainstream stereotyping. Thus, it was important to create space for it. These details help gain a richer understanding into participants' intimacies in the following chapters. The next chapter explores what intimacy means to the participants in general and the everyday impact of the society's rules on their intimacies.

Chapter 4: The Personal is Political

Intimacies are deeply personal and private matters but the context of heteronormativity and body-gender binary make them social and political too. Queer persons are living in a heterosexual world and this impacts their experiences of intimacy. This connection between the private and social is therefore ever-present. This chapter explores both aspects. The chapter highlights the personal meanings of intimacy in general, as described by the participants. The description of what intimacy means to participants is remarkable in its simplicity. It is what any layperson would generally describe for themselves. They appear almost routine except for the fact that they are anything but routine by dint of being queer. This may seem paradoxical but the simplest gestures of intimacy have layers of complexities because of the realm of gender-sexuality within which intimacies play out. Therefore, in addition to understanding participants' meanings of intimacy, I wanted to explore their opinions on the society we live in, within which they express their intimacies. The chapter includes a section, which I am titling 'Intimacy Snapshots', which are short portions I have chosen from each participant's narrative to describe their intimacy meanings. The decision to present data as much as possible directly through participant's voices, throughout the study, is a political one. I feel I owe it to the participants (and to queer people everywhere whose stories remain untold) that their experiences of intimacy are laid out in as much detail in their own voice.

Intimacy Meanings

This section highlights what intimacy means to participants in general and not necessarily in the context of their romantic relationships. This was the opening question during data collection and the intent was to capture broad "layperson's" ideas, meanings and definitions of intimacy (Gaia, 2002). Some participants have defined intimacy more broadly and some others in the context of a romantic relationship. Literature has revealed that behavioural, cognitive and affective elements are all present in an overlapping manner in the experience of intimacy and process of intimacy building (Gaia 2002;

Schaefer & Olson, 1981; Sternberg, 1986; Van den Broucke et al., 1995). This was evident in the articulations of the participants of this study too.

Participants have described intimacy as a *"connection," "compatibility," or a feeling of "comfort" and "closeness."* To Manu (they, queer, 34) intimacy signifies *"closeness, emotional and physical. Not necessarily both simultaneously present, but ideally both."* Ananya (she, lesbian, 33) says *"the emotional part is the sharing of stories, the physical would have them in your physical space and share your silences."* That intimacy covers physical and mental aspects was shared by all participants and G (she, bisexual, 47) adds *"I would like to say spiritual level. The connect that you have that cannot be described in very tangible terms. I am not discounting the physical. It is a package. I cannot think of one without the other."* The interpersonal nature of intimacies was articulated by participants. Arti (she, lesbian, 35) shares *"intimacy is a lucky by-product of when two people come together"* while SC (she, queer, 42) who is *"a very reserved person"* says *"anybody I can be comfortable with."* In the context of romantic relationships, many participants said that emotional and sexual intimacy go together. Some have described intimacy as *"stronger than sex"* while Bonnie (she, kinky & queer, 30) shared that the romantic and sexual intimacies don't go together for her. Sap (they, asexual queer, 46) shared that their relationship is *"asexual"* and physical intimacy is demonstrated through gestures and intimacy experienced is definitely a romantic one. Physical gestures of affection such as *"cuddling," "hugging," "sitting with bodies touching," "placing head on shoulder," "holding hands"* were described by participants. Ananya shares, *"if she and me are together and if there is nobody we need to hide [from], there will always be a little bit of contact between our bodies or we will somehow gravitate towards holding each other's hands or putting my hand through her hair."* Intimacy has also been described as *"something that transcends the physical, emotional boundaries"* as well as time and physical presence of the other person. For example, Ananya shares that with the person with whom she connects, she doesn't need time to build intimacy and she can experience a feeling of intimacy with them even when they may be physically not around her.

Intimacy Snapshots

The intimacy snapshots cover a range of intimate experiences shared by participants. Some describe the lengths to which participants have gone for love. Others describe unexpected first dates or the process of starting to get close to each other. Some snapshots bring out the confusion and hesitation of moving ahead in a relationship, while yet others throw light on participants' idea of love or the differing nature of their intimacies. These intimacy snapshots elaborate some more on intimacy meanings of participants. These descriptions below bring out the intensity, fun, excitement, love, warmth, confusion, hesitation and longing in participant's intimacy experiences. These descriptions continue to foreground participants' intimate experiences in their own voice, which has been a deliberate decision on how to present the data.

Ananya- she, lesbian, 33

So, we went to Kalyan [sixty kilometres outside Bombay] in the middle of the night. We left from here after eleven pm because we didn't want to get stuck in traffic and also told her, "Tum bhi khana, peena, phone calls, jo hi karna hai khatam karo" [Finish your dinner, wrap up whatever work you have]. So, we have left and after you cross Thane, between Thane and Kalyan there's a patch where there is no mobile range, and three of us have never been to Kalyan before. So now we have lost GPS, it is too dark, the signs are too dark to read. We sort of know, because of our travels further up, that some big junction will come. We are going on and on, can't get through to her sometimes because there's no network, sometimes because madam is not answering! Finally, we have reached inside Kalyan and we don't know where to go because she hasn't bothered giving me directions, address nothing which when we spoke, I realised because she didn't think I was serious. So even when she answered, she was sounding almost asleep. I said, "We are in Kalyan" and she says, "No". And I said, "Yes, I can see this, this and this!" And I said, "Dude, don't do this. I am not going back without you." And she said, "No, no it's okay." And she told us where to come and this is one scene that doesn't go from my head. She was standing in the middle of the road, blue jeans, black spaghetti, with her

hair flying in the wind and she is trying to hold it, “Oh my God” and I was just looking at her and thinking, “This? This woman is waiting for me?” It is one of those moments…

Namrata- she, lesbian, 32

But when she did come, I was like, “I am screwed.” Because she was very pretty. She sat in my car, we had a drive, we had our first kiss over there. For a couple of months, we kept meeting, we didn’t call each other anything at that time. We would drink, hang out and then things got a little serious.

I won't say, “I love you” for all relationships. When I feel like only then I will say I love you. These things you get the feeling yaar, you know. Not all dating turns into love. Love is too big of a word. I am a believer of love but I don’t like throwing that word around too much. I have to be very…till now it has happened thrice to me. It takes time. You want to be sure. You want to feel sure about the other person too. You don’t want to rush it and break your heart or the other person’s heart. Pta chala dating acha chal raha tha, woh bhi kharaab kar diya. I like it aaramse [Dating was going well and rushing into love ruined it. I like to take things slowly]. No stress on you or the other person. Relationship is supposed to make you happy, most of the time at least, so this much stressful is not good. Of course there will be fights and bad days but mostly it should make you happy. Relationship should be happy also because everything has stress. Ab relationship mein bhi stress dalega? Toh mein akele hi doobti yaar! [Now if a relationship is also full of stress then I would rather be alone]

G- she, bisexual, 47

We sat on the sofa, just the two of us, chatting chatting chatting. Right from the beginning we were extremely comfortable with each other as if we knew each other from a long time. My logical mind put it down to the fact that we have similar personalities so that is creating this level of comfort. So, we talked so much from about eight [pm] to about ten, ten-thirty [pm] and I think her girls must have come back by then and fallen asleep. I saw the time and I knew I should leave but I really did not want to go and I could see that she was also feeling that why are we stopping here? But I did leave.

I did not really initiate anything but in this conversation, I asked her why don't you come for a walk in the morning? She said I can't come at six [am] when you go. So, I asked her, "What time can you come?" She said probably five [am] so I said okay then if five works for you, I will come at five. So later she told me that never before had anyone done something like change their schedule for her. So, then we started having walks every day at five am. And our entire, getting to know each other, happened when we started walking together in the morning. And we used to walk for at least forty-five minutes to one hour every day and I used to try and go to her place and have a cup of chai [tea] and then go home. One day I went to her place in the evening at seven, can't remember why. I must tell you she is a very dedicated mother and very dedicated in terms of taking her children's studies and following schedule and so after seven her children could go down to play. I had gone to give something to her, I think. And we were chatting and there was a pause and she suddenly stepped forward and kissed me. I had not initiated. I was not aghast or surprised. To my mind, it had to happen, won't happen from my side I know but now that she had done it, then it had started. So that is how it started. So, our ritual was that- walk, after walk I used to drop over for chai [tea] and for fifteen-twenty minutes we used to spend time chatting, hugging, kissing, cuddling.

Aisha- she, queer, 29

My partner's favourite feminist author, post-structural feminist author has also written about companionship animals, which is their career, in terms of queer theory and understanding families. And there is one particular, small book, that book has been the Bible to their world. So, one day I think, what would it take for the author, Donna Haraway, to sign a copy and send it to me. So, I just put this on my alumni network and asked if anyone knows how I can do this? And someone replied and said, "I used to go to the University where she used to teach but now is retired. However, I know someone in that same department and a month later there is going to be a conference where this author will be attending. This is in California. So, if you buy the book, send it to me, I will give it to that person who will then travel for the conference and then meet her because they know her in a professional capacity and get it signed. Then she will bring it back and when I meet her next, I will mail it to you." This entire orchestration and I was

like what are the chances? But there was this tiny percentage that this might actually work. There were eighty things that could go wrong, it was driving me up the wall but I ordered the book on Amazon and sent it. Waited for a few weeks and then was told it has been handed over to this person and waited for a few more weeks. I couldn't keep emailing people who were doing me huge favours, I just had to quietly wait. Turns out it was signed. Then it had to be handed over to somebody else who would mail it and then I had to transfer payment for it. Which meant I had to transfer money to my sister in the US who could then transfer the money to that person. Very round about. Very elaborate plan for a tiny little book. Then it arrived, inscribed to them and their companions- The Companion Species Manifesto. And they nearly throttled me in delight (...) So when I say I am demonstrative, it is a bit bonkers.

Manu- they, queer, 34

For example, one very interesting thing, on our first date, I usually just ask people for a coffee. But she was going to come from out of town so she was going to spend some three hours so she did not want things to become awkward in case we did not hit it off. So, she suggested that we make it an activity-based date and she asked me to suggest the activity. And I was like, what is activity? So, then she gave an example from a previous date and they did some painting workshop, a public workshop they attended together. So, I suggested we can walk around in downtown together or go to the park though that's not my thing and then I suggested swimming and she was super interested in that.

The first date plan was a swim! Yes. Though it didn't happen like that. We went to a bar. Our plan was we will meet, we will get coffee together and if reasonably things are okay then we will go swim together. But her bus was late and by the time she reached we were both hungry and we said let's go close by and then it was a nice day to drink and we did and we just kept talking. So, the first date was supposed to be an activity based one and when I had suggested swimming she said, "You got major brownie points for that." (...) This was also the first time that someone has asked me to suggest an activity for a first date. And the second date we actually did swim.

SC- she, queer, 42

How did I realise [that I was interested in her]? To be very honest, I have never received a lot of attention of that nature. So, the moment I received that attention from her, I was really very happy. And that was the moment I said I want this. I guess that was when it happened and it was pretty soon, within fifteen days of knowing her. I was really thrilled. I was very happy. I would look forward to her call. There were two-three days when we didn't speak. She was waiting that I would call back and I was thinking, "Should I? Shouldn't I? Should I? Shouldn't I? Should I? Shouldn't I?" Had I been about a day or two late, it seems she would have lost the interest but thankfully I did message her and then we spoke. And it was from that moment that we started speaking more, more frequently. It was in fact during that time that I told her that I was interested in women. Before that I had not told her, I had not said anything. So, she was quite on the tenterhooks because she was out and I wasn't, I was sitting on the fence. So, she was really the one taking all the pressure. It must have been very difficult.

See I have been alone, I have lived alone for the longest part of my life. So, I was not very comfortable letting go of my freedom on the one hand and on the other hand I had a pretty bad marriage, it was a non-existent marriage, let me put it that way. And I had to be divorced and all of that happened. In fact, I was never interested in any relationships, in the marriage. I was happily independent, living my own life, in a city that I pretty much liked. So, I was very happy with my life. She enters into my life at that point of time. And I was liking the attention but I was also thinking, "Should I give bhav? Dena chahiye ya nhi?" [Should I reciprocate the attention or not] But then I was really swept.

Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30

For me, romantic and sexual are need not always be together. With T, it is more of a stable kind of thing which I have never had (...) I have been in a horribly power-laden relationship where I have been in more power of taking decisions or getting things my way with a man. But with women it has been the other way around! So, T was the first person where it was healthy and I understood that romance is not necessarily turbulent. And that is important for me and I want this in my life. Then I met someone and that was

like an adventurous domain, fatal attraction and also somewhat safe. It is not and it will never be and I don't want it to be what I have with T. I definitely don't want it to be like that.

I had heard someone in the community talking about her daughter saying that she has a puppy heart. And I think I have a dog heart, a baby heart, a mommy heart and a very dark female dominatrix heart. So, these are my shades. This person I am talking about, let's call her K, was allowing herself to be vulnerable in front of me like a baby. That gave immense pleasure. Also, people often think that being dominant means 'not vulnerable' but it is not like that. Baring your dark side means you are being vulnerable. And that itself makes the dynamic empathic and intimate experience. You may pursue it further or not. That is a different thing. But the fact that you are choosing to act upon desires which are otherwise tabooed, which you cannot act upon in your daily life, itself creates a scope for a different intimacy. In my case, with K, it has sustained so far.

Arti- she, lesbian, 35

And so, like with most people, it started with saying let's meet for drinks. And we met and we drank a lot and we had what I at that time thought was a one-night stand. And even now it is a one-night stand because the following morning I had no such expectations about I will meet this person again. I think I was just happy I got to sleep with someone I had a crush on. And at that time, I had just gotten out of something and I was feeling like this free and modern woman who was going to sleep around a lot! For the longest time I had been deprived of a woman's body and I was just happy to have had that even though I don't remember most of it, I was just happy to have had that and I was looking forward to having a lot of that. I just hadn't realised then that it would end up being only with this person! But we can say it was a one-night stand because the following morning there was no expectation that we would meet again for another date or that this would turn into something. And that is how we parted that morning, very amicable also. It was nice and polite. I do remember saying that I hope this can happen when I am not so drunk so that I can remember it and I thought it was very cheesy and I

was embarrassed later for having said that but it was the truth. I really wished that I could do this in a way that I could carry memories of it forward.

Tej- they, queer, 39

I found her very attractive on screen and then I met her in person and I have to say, "Usne meri dhajiya uda di" [she blew my mind] on meeting her in person. She was so attractive, so articulate, just rather stunning and so that made me extremely nervous and I thought that I was out of her league. And I was telling this to the person I was with in a relationship before and is my chosen family and she really supported me through this anxiety and attraction and everything else I was feeling. And we started to chat after that. And then we decided to meet up in her city and then the rest is history.

I said something upfront once when I was trying to flirt, because I was actually too scared to flirt because then I thought she wouldn't want to talk to me. So, I kept on backtracking, trying to tell her that she was attractive and so in some weird, misguided way I said that she looked bodacious and then once again when I was trying to compliment her, I said she looked comely. But of course, I couldn't compliment her outright and once I said she was out of my league so finally she took matters into her own hands because she got tired of all of my rubbish and said that I should kiss her when I met her and so that is what happened. So then that opened the floodgates for me a little bit but then when I did meet her, I was too nervous to kiss her and I took about three or four hours to actually kiss her.

Sap- they, asexual queer, 46

Hamara friendship badhta gya [our friendship kept strengthening]. Did not realise that we are getting attracted but friendship badhta gya. We used to be all the time together, in our own duniya [world]. We had gone for a college picnic and it was raining and we were sitting under the same umbrella. And I was wearing jeans as usual and our Principal saw us and thought that we were boy-girl. All our friends after that started teasing us like that, calling us change-mangu or husband-wife. I wanted to tell her that I had feelings for her, so one day I wrote a note and put it in her pencil pouch. But her friend saw me doing this, so I took it out immediately.

So, our families knew we are best friends so once her mom invited me to go with them on a trip to their native place. My family was also okay with it. So, I went and we got one week or ten days together. Of course, there were people we had to visit, her family/relatives and all but in the afternoons, we would go to the barren fields together nearby. We would sit under the shade of the Charoli tree or known as Chironji in Hindi. That is the first time I sang to her, "I just called to say, I love you." I expressed my feeling for her and also kissed her on her forehead. She also did not know anything about all this but she was curious about my feeling and never made me feel that I was doing something wrong. She loves reading and by then already had read some feminist books and novels where the main woman characters were rebel. But her family was and still is orthodox. And her personality also used to be thoda [somewhat] scared. I had also not read anything about this or didn't even think why I had feeling for her because I guess I was just listening to my heart. Next day, I sang, "Jab koi baat bighad jaaye." She wrote a letter to me in Marathi about her feelings for me. It was confirmed for us. We did not know about ki poora life saath rahenge par ek doosre ko chodenge yeh bhi koi baat nhi ki [if we would spend our lifetime together but we also knew that we would not leave each other].

Intimacy as a Space to be Myself

Participants have described intimacy as a *"space"*- an authentic space; a safe space; a political and/or community space. This is an important finding, distinct from how intimacy has been otherwise articulated and seems connected to gender-sexuality experiences of the participants.

Intimacy as an Authentic Space

Particular to queer people perhaps, participants experienced intimacy as a space where they could be *"authentic"*. Articulations such as *"a space where I don't have to think much, I can just be," "not have to censor myself," "where I am affirmed"* definitely included gender and sexuality aspects of the participants' lives. Such intimate spaces are particularly important to the participants as they otherwise may live fragmented lives or

experience erasure in fully expressing their authentic selves. Tej, Manu and Sap find that their realities of gender as non-binary persons are often overlooked, erased or not taken seriously. Several participants were not out as queer people to family members. Participants in heterosexual marriages faced the additional burden of performing a heterosexual lifestyle and were often assumed to be heterosexual by their family or social circle. This meant that all participants when interacting with cis-het family, friends or colleagues often had to censor themselves in different ways and for different reasons, mainly to avoid discrimination, violence and other such negative consequences. Therefore, it emerged from the participants that the experience of a space where they can be authentic was an intimate one.

Intimacy as a Safe Space

Participants shared that intimacy was the experience of a *"safe space."* A safe space in the context of queer lives can mean a space which is free of discrimination, which might otherwise be experienced on a daily basis from various sources. Tej, who identifies non-binary and lives with anxiety shares what intimacy means to them,

> *"Care, support, a space that is safe which means free from discrimination, recrimination. For someone living with anxiety, a space where I don't feel anxious to talk or share. Because of anxiety, social interaction really tires me out so then for me an intimate space is where I don't get tired from social interaction."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

Tej's experience of anxiety and exhaustion in social interactions suggests that they experience censure, discrimination and a minimising of their gender and their mental health concerns. Therefore, an intimate space for them is the absence of exhaustion and anxiety. This resonates with SC, who is 42 and identifies queer, shares that a safe space for her is one where *"I can share about myself and my life in a confident manner."* This indicates that queer persons often anticipate a negative reaction in matters of their queerness. SC adds that an assurance of confidentiality is necessary *"the other person will keep it in confidence if required, is an intimate setting for me."* It is an unfortunate, common experience for queer people to have their private matters gossiped about or shared without their consent. Therefore, an intimate safe space is one that is free of stigma and offers acceptance and confidentiality.

Intimacy as a Political and/or Community Space

Intimacy has been described as a *"political space"* by some participants. These spaces of politics are seen as intimate especially because of being able to connect over a common queer-feminist ideology that reflects one's experiences as queer persons and helps make sense of one's marginalised realities.

> *"Aside from intimacy as in intimate relationship which is with a romantic, sexual partner, intimacy would be for me community building which may not necessarily articulate itself as familial only. It is about which spaces I think are intimate for example I consider some activist spaces intimate, some friends' spaces intimate (...) In the intimate spaces that I have formed as an adult is that we share politics. We share a very particular feminist politics, left-leaning politics. Those with school friends or natal family were not born of politics but those that I have come to as an adult have come through politics and activist work."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

> *"The intimacies in the friends that I have made in the queer world which are not romantic or sexual but there is just such a sense of connection with close queer friends. It is stronger for me than birth family. It is like the first time I have felt that I can be myself and I can be my full self and whoever it is will accept me as I am. First time it has happened and it has happened in adulthood so it has been a long time coming."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

Participants expand the sites of intimacy beyond the traditional understandings of romantic and familial. The queer community, though diverse in many many ways, is often experienced as intimate because of the common thread of experiencing oppression on account of gender-sexuality. Bonnie, aged thirty shares *"also intimacy and relationship are not similar things. These are my life lessons. It does not have to be perceived to be in an intimate relationship only. As queers, we spend more time with our friends in the community than we spend in our relationship space."* All participants shared that they had been able to find queer community only in adulthood which points to an experience of loneliness in their growing up years within their families and peers (Ranade, 2018). In order to experience an intimate space, queer people have to put in labour to find, create and sustain political and/or community spaces especially in the absence of traditional forms of support via natal or marital families. For some participants, queer-feminist politics were used as a resource to make sense of one's oppressions. For participants, who may not be political, solidarity and strength were

sought through the queer community to deal with experiences of inequality. Thus, queer community is a resource that participants accessed.

Intimacy as a space: This articulation of an *"intimate space"* described as 'the experience of authentic, safe and political and/or community spaces as intimate' is an important finding and is directly linked to participants' marginalisation on account of gender-sexuality. Participants seek intimate spaces where they can be *"fully themselves,"* where there is an absence of discrimination and the presence of queer groups and/or political companions to travel their queer journeys with. Similar to this is a finding in a study on Black lesbian couples. Due to erasure and discrimination on account of both sexuality and race, lesbian couples make their lesbian home a safe space. "Creating a Safe Homeplace" was one of the ways in which the lesbian couple coped with the lack of external validation especially from families (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013, p. 722). Participants in this study too, shared that the traditional, familial sites of intimacy were often not experienced as intimate. Intimate spaces for them were based in their queer relationships, in their queer friendships, in queer politics and/or in queer community. These intimate spaces offer queer people the chance to find their queer realities mirrored, to believe that they do exist because there are other people like them (Winnicott, 1973) and to allow oneself possibilities of intimacy. As Sukthankar (1999) writes in the Introduction to Facing The Mirror "we [lesbians] are accustomed to having our lives be a myth" (p. xvi). Thus, the importance of intimacy as a (queer) space must be recognised as a huge resource that some queer people are able to find for themselves.

Impact of Social Context on Queer Lives and Loves

Research in the Global North (Addison & Coolhart, 2015; Bigner & Wetchler, 2004; Green & Mitchell, 2008; Mereish & Poteat 2015; Testa, Kinder & Ironson, 1987) and India (CREA, 2012; Fernandez & Gomathy, 2003; LABIA, 2013; Sappho For Equality, 2016) has recognised the impact of social stigma on queer lives and loves. I wanted to explore how the everydayness of an unequal social structure impacted participants,

particularly their intimacies. In this section, participants have shed light on the different ways in which society around them affects them.

Invisibility of Queer Love

One of the biggest struggles of a queer relationship is the invisibility within which it exists. In the imagination of the ordinary person, a heterosexual marriage is the only relationship that is visible and valued in society. In such a hierarchy, participants have experienced their relationships as being *"on the margins of mainstream constructs."* Therefore, an experience of *"being valid"* or *"not abnormal"* is hard to feel. The invisibility makes it is harder to *"see examples"* of queer intimacies. Participants shared that even before telling others, finding representation or validation for oneself was hard. Participants shared that resources and representation for heterosexual relationships were readily available as compared to queer relationships. This meant that it was much harder to have role models or support that keeps queer couples together.

> *"It makes it harder to find partners obviously, harder to find intimacy, harder to see examples of it out there and to know what you desire is not abnormal, stigmatized (...) We don't know whom to turn to when we have a problem. Is it this relationship that is fucked up and I should be getting out of it or are these normal things everyone has and we have to just work through them?"* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"In heterosexual relationships, navigating it is easier because there are already many known ways of negotiating. It is tried and tested. Someone must have done this or that because there are just so many heterosexuals that someone must have done it. While in queer relationships I may know only five people so I will know only that much info from them. To make sense of what to do with this person that I am in love with, my resources are only these many (...) I don't know where to find this (queer) community. And outside this community if I ask then I will get completely screwed for wanting to know."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

Erasure of Queer Couplehood

This invisibility leads to erasure of the queer couple in a heterosexual society. Cis-het people may often be unaware of, unwilling or unable to find ways to validate queer intimacies. Sap and Neel have been together for twenty-eight years but their relationship is not recognised by either of their families. Neel's parents do not know and Sap's family don't engage with them much as a couple. For the last twenty-eight years, they are

considered to be *"best friends"* which is a complete erasure of their romantic love for each other. G and P are both women who are in heterosexual marriages. When they met and fell in love, they were in their late thirties. They experienced intense love for each other and their closeness was evident to everyone in their social circle. G shares *"so our names GP used to be taken together always and is still taken even today. Even in the complex, if anything has to be undertaken, it is always G and P together. Even now we are a unit. Even till date. Just now for Dandiya [Gujarati community festival] we were made judges. G without P and P without G was unimaginable for people and still is."* Despite this, no one realised that they were a couple, who are very much in love with each other. They were continued to be viewed as married, heterosexual women who are very close friends. Years of being a couple gets erased and these kinds of erasures are common experiences for queer people.

If the couple relationship is known, more often than not, queer people are met with violence or a *"withholding of benefits"* that are otherwise available to cis-het couples. To protect themselves, queer couples *"have to be a couple behind closed doors"* and hide their couplehood from several spaces such as familial, workplace or social media. This adds to their experience of discrimination or feeling that *"no one is invested"* in their couplehood.

> *"When you see your [heterosexual] friends, siblings…parents give all the money, take their full kharcha aur hum log gareeb, hum ko ghar se nikaal rahe hai [take on their expenses but ask us to get out of the house]. They are so socially accepted, sab aate hai [everyone gets together], if something doesn't work out then families actually get into it and help them sort it out. And towards us it is totally ulta [the other way round]. Shaadi karna chahte ho? Ghar se nikal jao [you want to marry? Get out of the house]. In fact, woh toh aur todh dete hai what we share [They add to breaking up what we share]. Emotionally also you feel ki humme bhi shaadi karni hai yaar par kaha possible hai? [It is not possible to get married]. In these things we are kept out."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

This lack of validation and social sanction might sometimes result in one's own partner ending up devaluing or erasing the couplehood or the intense love that is felt for a woman. G shares how after her relationship with P ended, G was able to talk about it to

some of her queer friends and even her daughter but wonders if P will ever talk about their love story to anybody,

> *"I don't think she will ever acknowledge in front of others what we have shared (...) We had all gone out recently and she is a great narrator and she spoke at great length about the men who were interested in her and in what-what way and her daughter was right there. So, would she ever even talk about this woman, not necessarily me, but this woman who was madly in love with her, is the question?"* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

In such a negative, stigmatised environment, Arti shares *"it takes tremendous amount of work and strength to even feel that you have something that is valid enough to share."* This resonates with a study by Sappho for Equality (2016) "the lack of social and legal recognition creates a general milieu of intolerance, harassment and discrimination. Despite such challenging life-situations individuals show immense resilience and indomitable spirit to overcome adversities and creating chinks in the dominant order to survive and live" (p. 93).

Comparisons to the Norm

Another struggle that participants faced was a constant comparison of their lives and intimacies to the existing heterosexual and cis-gender norms. Arti expressed that she found it *"hugely problematic"* that her butch-femme lesbian relationship was perceived as a man-woman relationship by *"homonegative people."* She goes on to share how normative society responds to sexuality and gender,

> *"So, this comes from tying masculinity to a body, gender, sexuality and all of this which will mean that the feminine woman in the dynamic will always be someone who is available for male consumption and the masculine woman in the dynamic will always be a failed woman. Whereas they are just two women, one happens to be gender conforming or has gender expression feminine and the other one is masculine in her gender expression. So, unless we collapse these connections it would be hard."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

SC adds that the social norms overshadow one's innermost experience of themselves and therefore how living every day is a fight,

> *"Gender binary is right up there. It is patriarchy. It is very easy for a family to segregate a man and a woman and not see anything else. It is very easy for them. They do not understand the term gender. That is the first problem. They do not understand that there might be a lack of gender. Somebody may say I don't*

> *identify myself as a man or a woman or trans or anything else. I just am. And this is something that would freak them out. We fight every day."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

All participants in this study were quite vocal that comparisons to the existing norms which are often *"prescriptive"* in terms of gender roles, expressions of love and sexual acts did not work for them or reflect their realities. They expressed that these comparisons were *"limiting," "not applicable" or "baffling"*. Aisha shares that the norms are designed such that they don't have space or value for queer intimacies,

> *"It is not that there is no engagement with these larger systems. It is just that the engagement has been critical. When I say I am baffled, I am also being facetious because I recognise that these systems are something that I am not. Systems that can back you into a corner if you will let them. When I say I am confused by them perhaps it is because I can't participate in them. Perhaps I am confused because I do not fit the participation criteria. When I say we don't follow those scripts, part of it is that we can't. The system keeps us out and we also don't want it. It doesn't fit us."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Replication of the Norm

The overarching presence of norms is internalised by all people, heterosexual and queer alike. Since these are the only visible and socially sanctioned ways of relating, many participants shared that they often began their journey by trying to *"replicate"* these norms or know of other queer people who might try.

> *"There could be a butch woman who feels that not being the more active partner in bed could lead to her masculinity being invalidated. Then being that masculine in bed would be a way to affirm her gender expression. So, in the community there might be butches, who unfortunately because of how the world is, have not had the luxury of exploring more in bed and stretching or stepping out of some of these roles in bed. So, I wouldn't really blame the women or the butch woman for it."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

However, what appears to be 'replication' is simply not so because their experiences as queer people don't quite fit the man-woman model as Arti shares *"of course it is not a replication! It is two women in a relationship so how can that be replicating man-woman?"* It takes a while to recognise the oppression of these norms and the damage it does to oneself. Then starts the *"struggle"* of figuring out what works for oneself, of unlearning the scripts and starting to believe that one is *"deserving"* and that *"it is okay*

to demand safety, it is okay to demand intimacy, it is okay to demand sexual pleasure" in a romantic relationship. All participants from this study expressed that their queer lives and queer loves did not replicate the heteronormative model of intimacies. As Manu put it *"these limit the way you express yourselves in the relationship, who you can be, who you are allowed to be, how you are allowed to be with each other."*

Participants pointed out that the assumption that queer people replicate heterosexual intimacy and man-woman gender roles ends up misrepresenting their queer experiences. Participants gave examples of how there were some crucial differences from the norm in the experience of emotional and sexual intimacy when it came to queer AFAB persons.

> *"So, in a heterosexual relationship, you immediately get slotted in roles, gender roles and therefore because you get slotted into roles the expectations are that many and varied and at various levels. Conversely, in a relationship with a woman that doesn't happen and empathy is more. It is mutually very nurturing. There is conflict also, all relationships have some conflict but these relationships are more nurturing (...) The way of expression also changes. Also, the way the expression is accepted, changes. There is a word in Marathi called olava [softness/ succulence] that is there with women. In my experience, the intimacy with a woman has felt more intense."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

In terms of sexual acts, peno-vaginal penetration is considered the ultimate act of intimacy in cis-heterosexual relationships. "In Western cultural traditions, sex is what you do with your genitals, real sex means heterosexual intercourse and penile penetration is the gold standard of human sexuality" (Peplau et al., 2004, p. 363). Similar to this, participants shared that that the act of penetration is not necessarily viewed the same way in queer relationships and there is no such concept of an 'ultimate act.' Another interesting finding was that the sexual act of penetration has been experienced vastly differently when in a heterosexual context and in a queer relationship. Participants shared that *"vaginal penetration"* was a strict no-no when they were with cis-men but with their queer lovers, they were open to penetration, in fact Arti shares that she loves it with a butch woman.

> *"Where we stay and the kind of super patriarchal context we grow up in, I find that multiple partners that I have been with, are super super afraid about vaginal penetration but that changes in queer relationships. They have never been comfortable enough to do it with a cis-man even having dated cis-men and been with cis-men, they have not been comfortable with the idea of penetration. And I have been okay with that because sure if the person doesn't enjoy it then why would I do it? But then somehow things change along the way and they start enjoying it and they are surprised about it. And it has happened more than once so it's like a pattern."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"I have never liked being penetrated by a man and I only, only enjoy being penetrated by a butch woman and that just dispels this whole equating of butch women to men. More people should know this. If people think penetrating means man and I am saying I don't like being penetrated by a man and I love being penetrated only by a butch woman so that says a lot."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

Literature from the Global North reveals that using heterosexuality as the reference framework to study queer relationships which ended up stereotyping queer relationships or considering queer relationships as lacking or less than heterosexual relationships was prevalent till the 1980s (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2006). While this bias in research may have been challenged, the everyday experience of participants as cited above reflects that this bias is still very much prevalent in our society and participants have to negotiate with dominant social norms on a daily basis.

Queer lives and loves are based within a social context that visibilises only one kind of sexuality i.e. heterosexuality and only two types of bodies that are supposed to correspond with two types of genders i.e. man/male and woman/female. When experiences do not fit this system, they are pushed to the margins. It is not that they don't exist but they are often invisible to or devalued by a cis-het society (Blando, 2001). Sappho for Equality (2016) write "what remains specific to LBTQ lives and their liveability, is the constant negotiations that these 'abject' lives have to make with the legal framework of criminality or the social framework of invisibility, marginalisation and discrimination" (p. 125). The results of this chapter reflect the same.

This chapter highlighted the broad meanings of intimacies that participants have. Participants shared that they experienced intimacy as a closeness with others that was

both at a physical and mental level. Particular to queer people was the experience of intimacy as a space in which they could be their authentic selves, could feel safe and connect politically or be around queer community. These spaces are typically built in adulthood, away from familial spaces. The participants also shed light on how the social context impacts their intimacies in different ways. Participants shared that it was hard to find validation or support for their intimacies and often had to struggle alone in finding and sustaining their relationships. Often, incorrect comparisons are made between cis-het and queer lives and this ended up minimising their experiences. Participants shared that they do not necessarily draw on heterosexual scripts and delineated some crucial differences. It is often assumed that queer people replicate the heterosexual ways of doing relationships and therefore an authentic reading and representation of their intimacies is still lacking. Therefore, one section of the chapter was dedicated to describing participant's intimacies in their own voice.

A quote from Arti, helps sum up the complexities of queer intimacies in the social context of heteronormativity and body-gender binary and why the personal is therefore political,

> *"We do say that relationships on the margins don't have the burden of a lot of mainstream constructs which in some ways is true because you are already not in the running. But no burden does not mean complete freedom because you are constantly struggling. You are struggling with your own self, with the world, with people's reactions, so amongst all those struggles to really find intimacy, I think it's an act of great strength and imagination and creativity."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

All queer children and adults are continuously conditioned and socialised by heterosexual and cis-gender rules. This reality of being queer in a heterosexual world; of also being marginalised because of it, brings with it many struggles and freedoms, contradictions and resistance. These become more apparent in later chapters. The next two chapters focus on intimacy meanings and expressions as described by participants specific to their romantic relationships. Meanings of intimacy and the social context described in this chapter are fleshed out in the following chapters within the context of a couplehood.

Chapter 5: Intimacy Experiences Across Relationship Stages

The queer act of being and becoming who you are and loving who you want is often experienced through queer intimacies (Meenu & Shruti, 2012). The intimacies described by participants are captivating sometimes in their everydayness and sometimes in their nuance. As stated in Breaking the Binary (2013) "an intimate relationship between two women, or a woman and an FTM, or an FTM and a gender queer person (to cite just a few possibilities), is also a love story that ends up breaking many of the rules, no matter how conventionally it may (seem to) begin" (p. 45). This chapter captures the "essence of intimacies" (Gaia, 2012) as experienced and described by participants in their romantic relationships. The focus in this chapter has been on describing lived realities of participants, their felt experiences, the range of emotions that are experienced in romantic relationships, their difficulties, their ups and downs, the intensity of their romance and how intimacy is expressed to each other right from when they met to where they might be in their relationships now. It is important to recognise that these intimacies are being expressed in the midst of enforced heterosexuality. More often than not, participants' sexuality and gender journeys are invisible to the people around them and yet intimacies are being expressed, exchanged, held and built within this culture of silence. This chapter attempts to make these intimacies legible. The chapter captures these intimacies in four stages as elaborated below.

Conceptualising Stages for Queer Romantic Relationships

The narratives of the participants are definitely indicative of ever-present struggles that are introduced into queer lives by the constant overarching presence of heteronormative and body-gender binary norms as seen in the last chapter. One way to contextualise these struggles has been to explore intimacies in different stages of a relationship. Literature on relationships has revealed that stage models are used to study relationships (Fox, 2015). Stages of a relationship is an idea I have borrowed from "Knapp's Relational Stages" (Fox, 2015, Knapp 1983). Knapp (1983) describes "this evolutionary model of message making from greeting to goodbye included the following stages: initiating,

experimenting, intensifying, integration, bonding, differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding and terminating" (p. 54). I have not applied Knapp's stages to queer romantic relationships. I have borrowed the idea that 'relationships can be divided into stages'. I have divided queer romantic relationships into four stages to understand how intimacy is sought, how a relationship is started, how it is sustained and how it may end. The intention was not to linearly following how queer relationships move across time. For many queer relationships, a stage-wise progression is often not present as illustrated by Bonnie's words *"for many things [intimacies] there are no marked beginnings and ends also."* The exploration of intimacies in stages has been useful because each stage comes with its own particularities and complexities, as stated earlier, due to queerness being marginalised in our social context. This ever-present negotiations with social norms while finding, building, sustaining or ending intimacies as queer people can be studied through stages to allow for an in-depth exploration. Thus, four stages of queer romantic relationships have been conceptualised. I have titled these and explained the intention of choosing each stage, below.

Stage One- Seeking a Romantic Relationship

We live predominantly in a caste-dominated, Hindu society where an intimate relationship is usually arranged by family elders along certain social categories (Menon, 2007, 2012; Sen et al., 2011). This relationship is termed as a marriage between a cis-gender, heterosexual man and woman. This is a visible relationship, legally and socially sanctioned. Even for those seeking a love marriage, since heterosexuality is accepted in our culture, heterosexual people are able to find others like them to have an intimate relationship with. Therefore, what of those who are not heterosexual? "Given all the homophobia and transphobia everywhere, it is astonishing that queer individuals are able to seek, let alone find, intimate partners" (LABIA, 2013, p. 45). While navigating a society where everyone is assumed heterosexual, how are queer people able to find others like them to build intimacies with? Additionally, how are intimacies sought when sexuality of the potential partner is not clear or assumed/outwardly straight? Thus, it becomes important to explore stage one on 'seeking a romantic relationship'.

Stage Two- Starting a Romantic Relationship

Having met someone they are interested in, what are some of the reasons for starting relationships? How is it figured out whether the other person is interested in a relationship or not, how are those messages being conveyed, especially when the sexuality of the other person may not be clearly stated as queer? Once a relationship begins, how are intimacies exchanged? When heterosexuality and one's gender is not a given by society's standards, what meaning is made of oneself needs to be conveyed when intimacies are shared. Therefore, self-disclosure while an important aspect of intimacy (Gaia, 2002; Schaefer & Olson, 1981) cis-het or queer, takes on an added complexity due to gender-sexuality journeys and have to be accounted for when intimacies are starting to build at this stage. In the absence of heteronormative scripts and labels of marriage and husband-wife, what labels are participants using to describe what they share?

Stage Three- Sustaining a Romantic Relationship

Queer relationships are forced to exist in a social context that does not provide any social or legal sanction to their intimacies. No partnership rights are available. This additionally means that all couples function in a resource-scarce environment with none or limited sources of support (Bigner & Wetchler, 2004; Green & Mitchell, 2008). Therefore, couples have to hold these relationships for themselves as opposed to cis-het couples who have ample social and legal sanction, rights and privileges (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). In the last chapter, it was evident that participants receive little or no visibility, validation or support for their intimacies. Thus, it becomes important to explore in this stage how intimacies are expressed and consolidated in such a context of deprivation and erasure (Ranade, Chakravarty, Nair, & Shringarpure, 2020).

Stage Four- Ending a Romantic Relationship

While relationship ending may not seem like a stage that every relationship reaches, this is a possibility (Knapp, 2005; Mitra & Nair, 2011). Divorce exists as a formal, legal ending of a marriage in cis-het couples which has its own popular script of usually having acrimonious ends. Mutual consent divorces do exist but any ending falls within the legal

system. Queer relationships fall out of this legal system altogether (Peplau and Fingerhut, 2006) and therefore the ending of relationships is often navigated in different ways (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al, 2011). The exploration of this stage reveals the different reasons and circumstances under which relationships end.

I am using the term 'couple' to indicate both partners and the fact that they are/were together (dyad/ equation). Please note however that 'couple' has not necessarily been used by all participants. I am using the term 'partners' when talking about the people in the couple. The sections below now go in-depth into highlighting the intimacy experiences of participants in their romantic relationships.

Stage One- Seeking a Romantic Relationship

One aspect of seeking a romantic relationship is about how and where these intimacies began. Some participants shared that teenage explorations with cousin sisters and girls who were neighbours and friends had been possible. Some added that despite these early explorations, as adults they had not been able to pursue their queer desires until much later. G and SC who are both in their forties and identify bisexual and queer respectively share that teenage explorations of sexuality had been interrupted in their twenties. This happened because of getting into a heterosexual marriage themselves, or not having spaces or access to any representation of queerness, or the lack of options, wherein the person they were interested in was in a heterosexual relationship.

> *"What you need to know about me is the fact that my exposure to the queer world was next to zero. I did not have any kind of representation around me, except a cousin. I have felt attracted to women, yes, but I have never really had the…I never went and told the other person. It was not about internalised homophobia, no disgust, no shame, no nothing at all (...) For me I cannot go one step ahead without that emotional connect and my spaces were such that they did not allow."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

> *"I have never had a serious relationship ever so I was deprived of attention so to say. Nor did I pay a lot of attention to anybody. Nor did I have the courage to and even if I had a feeling for somebody I would never go and tell them that I have a crush on them or feelings for them. I have never acted on my feelings."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

Looking for Love

We live in a society where each person we meet is usually outwardly heterosexual. More often than not, queer people are assumed to be heterosexual. Sappho For Equality (2016) shares:

> Heterosexual love and romance always seems to triumph over homosexual romance. When it comes to heterosexual relations there are multiple sources which can mediate and facilitate the enactment of a romantic erotic relationship and create congenial conditions for finding soul mates and partners etc. People in homosexual relationships operate from a point of major disadvantage in this area. Resources that will facilitate such romance in the form of friends, love songs, befitting poetry or even the self-confidence to propose to a love interest are hard to find. (p. 44)

The story of many participants reveals the same. While most of them knew of their own sexuality, it was often not a matter that was known to others. Yet, in these heterosexual spaces many participants did find love. Ananya and Bonnie had fallen in love with their office colleagues, Sap and Arti had met their partners in a college setting and G had fallen in love with P who lived in the same housing society.

A point to note here is that the participant's assigned gender may have played a role in relegating the spaces to seek intimacies to a more private realm and everyday sphere (office, college, neighbourhood) as compared to gay men who usually find potential partners in public cruising areas such as parks or public toilets and more recently on online dating apps. The Breaking the Binary (2013) report has a similar finding "the classroom, the workplace, the house next door" is where queer AFAB persons found love (p. 45). After participants came in contact with the queer community, some newer spaces opened up for them namely, queer events, queer political spaces and online dating spaces that provide queer dating options. Tej had first seen their potential partner on screen, in a queer documentary film at a queer event and Manu met their current partner, Laila, through an online dating site,

> *"My most recent relationship started from a dating app OKCupid. Because I wanted to date someone desi [brown Indian] in Michigan. Michigan is like safedi ki chamkaar [very White], so it is rare to meet queer people of colour on campus.*

> *And it is a University campus so it is mainly undergrads and so if you want slightly older people, I had to go on a dating app."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

Some participants shared that they had simply fallen in love with a woman. They were not 'looking for love' but an attraction had developed even though there had been no conversation at all about love or sexuality. Despite this silence, one or both persons were aware that this closeness between them was different from a friendship. G and P were in their late 30s and both in heterosexual marriages. They lived in the same housing complex and were *"friends"* but from the moment that they had met, G knew that this was not just a friendship,

> *"You know whenever we used to meet, I used to feel that what is this, this is so stupid, we are talking like this, itna formally, somewhere at the back of mind, not even a conscious thought that it is going to go somewhere but there is more to this connect than this chatting that we are doing. I never told her and I used to feel very amused regarding this. I used to laugh about it that our alter egos must be standing there thinking yeh kya chal rha hai, kitna time waste kar rahe hain?" [what is going on? How much time will they waste?]* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

Sap, who identifies agender, was only 17 when they fell in love with Neel in the year 1992. They shared that they had no idea about queer love and did not know what these feelings were but *"I was just listening to my heart."* Even after twenty-eight years, Sap vividly remembers that moment of falling in love,

> *"I was standing outside the office for admission procedure with my sister and Neel came to get railway concession at the counter. I wasn't a very keen observer back then so didn't look here and there. But my sister spotted this girl and said, "See, she has such long hair." And I looked at her and I don't know what happened. In that moment, something stirred inside me. It was love at first sight."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Despite lack of representation and knowledge about queer love, participants shared that they had been able to find love, even without consciously looking for it. In their everyday spaces such as their workplace or college, which were outwardly heterosexual, when that 'someone special' came along, participants always knew that this was attraction and different from feeling of a friendship. This is particularly important to note in a gender-segregated society such as ours. Friendships are expected to happen between same gender persons and 'female friendships' are particularly common. All participants had several female friends and yet they always knew when there was attraction with a particular

person. They always knew that this particular attraction was different from a friendship though they may not have had the words to describe that difference. For those participants, who came in contact with the queer community, representation plus opportunity to meet someone queer definitely went up.

Pursuing Attractions

Most of the literature available is about cis-heterosexual attractions that are therefore bound by body types and gender expressions/roles that fall within binary understandings (Peplau et al., 2004). There is an understanding about the cis-het man being the pursuer and the cis-het woman being the object of desire. When it came to queer attractions, what did participants find initially attractive about the other person and how did they convey their interest?

Ease of conversation: It emerged from the participants' responses that an ability to connect over conversations played an important role in piquing their interest, *"so to go ahead in relationships, 50% is talking. That is the main thing" or "conversation is very important. It would be important in the beginning to some degree."* This connect over conversations is similar to heterosexual women's articulations about what they feel constitutes intimacy (Gaia, 2002). SC was 37 at the time of meeting someone and lived in a different city at the time. When initial interest was sparked, she and her potential partner would speak every day on the phone and an hour would pass by easily,

> *"She would ask me the tiniest of things such as khana kya khaya, banaya toh kaise banaya, what are doing at this moment, describe the room for me, describe what you are doing, what can you see on your right, on your left? Things like that so it was very nice. And I was comfortable sharing."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

> *"We could talk on any subject and till date it is like that. And we share everything with each other like kya khana khaya to everything else. Any damned topic and we can talk from politics to all topics. Then when MTNL phone connection came then toh ghanto [for hours] we would talk. I don't remember what all we used to speak but one hour used to feel like nothing."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Physical attractiveness: Physical attractiveness was cited as a reason for interest in the other person. The person's looks, features or mannerisms were a source of attraction. Arti who describes herself as a femme lesbian shares that what attracted her to the other

person was her masculine gender appearance. Manu shared that they find a woman's eyes very attractive and are attracted to femme women but not women who are mainstream feminine. Ananya shared that she found herself drawn to a colleague's mannerisms. There is an indication in these descriptions that normative notions of attractiveness, especially around feminine beauty may not match queer person's ideas of attractiveness in a potential partner.

> *"All I knew at that time was appearance which was very hot. I can very simply say that that is the only type I am attracted to- masculine women. And I thought that this person was masculine woman."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

> *"So, I mainly tend to date women who are slightly more feminine, not high femme but not masculine. High femme mujh se nhi hota [I won't be able to]. What I mean by femme is that not super focused on appearance and not the heterosexual imagination of feminine."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"I could just watch her work. After the second or third day I could just watch her work. The way she spoke to her clients, the way she spoke to her team, these little, soft soft things of hers. The way she would treat her patients, handle their grievances, handle their pain, the way she would teach her juniors, she would be happy to share all her knowledge and keep gaining more."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Similar political ideology: Similar politics or ideology was cited as a crucial connect for intimacy. Aisha identifies queer and was 24 years of age at the time of meeting her current partner. She shares that she had read a book the other person had written and was keen to connect with them because of similar political ideologies,

> *"We met because of politics. We met in an activist space. It is very important to me that in a romantic, sexual relationship, especially a romantic relationship that there is a shared politics. And this had become clear to me after the 1st relationship and at this juncture in my life I acknowledge four relationships, all of them with queer identified individuals."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Conveying Interest

Having found someone attractive, how did participants convey their interest to a potential partner? Given that the context of attraction was a non-heterosexual one, participants could not always be direct or open in their declaration of interest for the following reasons. One, they may not know the sexuality of the person they were interested in.

Two, there wasn't enough representation on how to go about this. Three, given the stigma surrounding non-heterosexual love, participants could run the risk of having a negative outcome to their expression of interest. Thus, for most participants there was a certain tentativeness to the process; they would have a *"hunch"* or they would try to *"strategically share narrative"* in order to express their interest and gauge if there was reciprocation. Arti and Aisha share the 'techniques' they employed which was initiating interesting conversation and showing their grasp on queer-feminist politics. Manu shared that they try to be a bit more direct about their interest and if the person says no then it becomes clear that they can't go ahead with this.

> *"I had a hunch that this person would appreciate sparkling conversation, perhaps sharp wit and most of all political conversations."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

> *"When you occupy activist spaces, what some people do is strategically share narrative and so we will share something that is intimate about our life but with the hope to inspire some kind of empathy or create a connection with other people to say that there are people like this in the world."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

> *"Usually my mode of operation is that I just say it to the person that I like you and would you like to get coffee? Even on the dating app and even in person. And when I have not known whether the person is queer or not, I have still said it and I have once been turned down because she is not gay and I was like that is fine."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

Ananya shared that she anticipated a negative response and hence was reluctant to express her feelings,

> *"And my friend asked me, "Why don't you reply?" and I said I don't want to fall in love with her. And she smirked. And I said what is the point? Why should I accept those feelings and go into it and feel it only to be disappointed? And she said if it is there, it is there. Either you love her or you don't. Whether you accept or not, the feeling is there and the pain will come if it has to."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Some participants found it even harder to express interest because of additional concerns like being colleagues at the same office or being a person who has anxiety. Tej identifies non-binary and queer. They were 34 at the time of meeting someone but found it very hard to convey their interest,

> *"Because of anxiety, I was scared to initiate contact, even a message, definitely never call because I thought I would be intruding. I had anxiety about not giving her enough space or being overbearing or maybe being pushy or may be pushing her away. I wasn't as confident of myself and overall lots of anxiety around this. In fact, I had discussed this at length in sessions with my therapist also because I had too much anxiety around initiating any sort of contact though I really wanted to."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

Bonnie identifies gender-queer and was 25 when she felt an attraction towards a colleague. The tentativeness is again apparent in this incident because of sharing the same workplace,

> *"So when I met T, we spoke for two days and I was marroing line [showing interest] and she was also accepting the line. I did not want to make the first move in a work place and have to hear that queer people are creepy (...) So when we said goodbye, she said, "Go mushy on me" and I said, "Can I kiss your forehead? And she said, "Nobody is stopping you from kissing my forehead." She probably expected a kiss elsewhere. I thought forehead was safe."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

It was harder to gauge, if the person that participants were interested in, was reciprocating that interest. Bonnie's immediate answer when I asked how she knew the other person might be interested was *"who the hell ever knows? I was just being this young cool person talking about sexuality in office. And T reached out to me about it and there was a niceness to it."* Participants tried to read between the lines *"on my birthday she wished me. I remember feeling very excited, I remember feeling that she wouldn't wish me in this way if she only wanted to be friends"* or *"there was an odd-like energy."* Some participants tried to assess the level of interest through actions and body language such as conversations, glances, touch and kisses that were initiated by the other person and/or an interest to know more about the participant was expressed. Namrata shared that she would try to gauge the other person's interest through her body language while on a date,

> *"The gestures, the eye thing-woh aakhon ke ishaare [using eyes to convey interest]. When she comes near you, talks to you, whispers in your ear, all this is part of intimacy (...) When you sit and talk, you can understand by the gesture how someone is like, are they touching your hand or are they touching your shoulder or are you touching them, just some friendly gestures. You understand, woh shoulder hataa rhi hai ki aage laa rhi hai [is she leaning towards or away from you]."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

And SC found herself swept off her feet!

> *"This was one woman who came to me, out there, confident, comes to me, carries herself very confidently, very nicely, very sweetly, very warm. All of that attention she just pushed on me, it was all there, 100% on me. I was in seventh heaven. I am floating somewhere...that is the feeling I had then."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

In stage one, intense attraction towards another person was experienced, often without even looking for it. There was a tentativeness/ strategy in conveying that interest along with looking for clear signs of reciprocation and consent. Participants shared that if interest was mutual then they would take things further.

Stage Two- Starting a Romantic Relationship

Even though non-heterosexual love is stigmatised, studies by queer/LBT groups suggest that despite all their struggles with society, queer AFAB persons find love and form romantic relationships with each other (CREA, 2012; LABIA, 2013; Sappho For Equality, 2011). Literature (including Indian literature) has shown that the bond of love between two women is intense and strong (Meenu & Shruti, 2012; Sukthankar, 1999). Even fiction and poetry has always indicated an intense closeness in women's attractions to each other (Vanita & Kidwai, 2008; Pattanaik, 2014). This intensity is reflected in the participants stories. In stage two, the reasons for why a romantic relationship is started and how intimacy is built in this initial stage is highlighted.

Reasons to Start Romantic Relationships

One of main reasons for starting a relationship was that participants simply fell in love. As cited above, in this study too, the feeling of intense desire and love has been described by participants. Both Ananya and G fell in love with women who were already in heterosexual marriages but when they fell in love, their feelings were mutual and intense.

> *"And am telling you, before even I could take a breath, we were kissing and it was crazy. It was literally like she wanted to eat me up and like she's not eaten in a day kind of a hunger. And full passion and I never thought this could happen when you kiss someone for the first time. It was insane. We changed the distance the cab was going three times till we eventually said that we couldn't keep doing*

> *this and we were not sure if the cab guy was okay though most of the time we didn't care."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)
>
> *"The attraction that we feel for each other is completely different. We couldn't just stay away from each other ever. When I used to return from office I used to go to her place. And that is what I wanted to do all the time. I never wanted to go home (...) We used to tell each other that we can't get each other out of our heads."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

For some participants, the sexuality of the person they had fallen in love with was outwardly heterosexual and any aspect of queerness had not been explored before. This gave rise to the question of consensual intimacy-building when sexualities 'apparently' did not match. Most participants shared that irrespective of whether sexuality of the other person was known as queer or not, they would wait for very clear signals from the other person before proceeding with intimacies. For Ananya, as far as she was concerned, her colleague Sharmila was straight and in a heterosexual marriage. Ananya could sense that a certain closeness had begun to build between them but she waited for Sharmila to openly state what she wanted. Bonnie too was not aware of her office colleague's sexuality but was sure that she would not pursue any intimacies unless the other person clearly reciprocated the interest that Bonnie had expressed.

> *"So, I knew that this holding [my] hand was sort of uncharacteristic for her as well but I left my hand open, I did not hold hers back. Because at every point, whether she is feeling it or not, she is straight. I know what I am feeling and I am not going to do anything that crosses any sorts of lines, right? (...) So I asked what do you want to do and she said, "I want to kiss you."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)
>
> *"Then I said I love you because I didn't have language, how else do you say it? And she didn't say anything (...) So there was no response so I would read it as a no and I would not go poking. I wasn't suppressing my feelings but it was clear thing that if it does not go forward, I will stop there."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

For some participants, the relationship started because they simply fell in love, for others it happened because they felt they had met someone who was right for them and wanted to give it a try. This tended to happen when participants were surer of their own queer

sexuality or had been in touch with the queer community or had had the experience of being in two-three relationships before.

> *"We were both looking for love and romance and sex so we just knew what it was the other person was going to do for us and that helped to see each other as couple."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

> *"Person is decent, I can have a good conversation, sex is enjoyable, physical intimacy generally like cuddling is enjoyable and sort of mutually matched levels toh chalega."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"How they carry themselves, education, what kind of family background they belong? You have to look at everything when you are thinking about a relationship."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

Sometimes, participants have realised only retrospectively that they had always meant to be in a relationship with this person, while others shared that the relationship started only because the other person had taken some steps towards it. Aisha shares how once she connected with her potential partner, the two of them were always in touch and messaging each other and having several conversations. They would even meet up and go on dates. However, Aisha says that it did not follow the typical trajectory of dating to relationship,

> *"I wouldn't say I stumbled into it because it was directional, I intended to, but I don't know how to do it the way you hear stories (...) So I can't remember our first date, did we even go on a 1st date? I think we may have gone on a 15th date and at that point we must have been like, "This is a date." So, we did go on dates but there was no clean moment, we are stepping from one realm of friendship into a relationship. In retrospect, I know it was never intended to be a friendship."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Tej shares that while they felt quite ready for a relationship with this particular person, they would never be the first to ask. So, they waited until the other person made a move,

> *"She had just got out of a relationship and so had I and she kept saying we are hooking up but I don't want to be in a relationship, without any attachments and we will see each other when we can and it is obvious that we enjoy each other's company. So, this went on. I am not pressuring you; I am not asking and I kept on repeating that until one fine day about nine months later she called me one evening and said, "You have to ask me to be your girlfriend." I was more than happy because I was very clear about her and what I felt for her and so I asked her."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

The aspect of consent that was evident in stage one continued to be navigated throughout stage two also. Participants always waited for clear signals of reciprocation. In a cis-het intimate context, similar upholding of consent has usually not been present with cis-women experiencing pressure to respond, often followed by instances of violence at their refusal to reciprocate interest in cis-men (Goswami, 2017).

From Love to Relationship

Having found someone, they had fallen in love with or were interested in, how did participants begin to build a relationship in this initial stage?

Self-disclosure: Sharing personal, private information was seen as an important indicator of intimacy as personal matters that may otherwise never be/ less shared with others were shared with this person. Intimacy meant that they were curious about each other and people in each other's life and their past.

> *"We started charting our life journeys and we really saw, it was uncanny. There were lot of things that were happening similarly in her life and my life at the same time. So, we started thinking there is something to this. It may be beyond our understanding but there is something here."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

> *"I wanted to tell you about me, I wanted to hear everything about you. Slowly slowly I started telling her about more and more people in my family, in my friend circle. And it was the same from her end as well."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Self-disclosure is an important aspect of intimacy (Gaia, 2002) across all relationships. What is different about queer relationships is the additional content or information about gender-sexuality journeys. Given the diversity and uniqueness that is inherent to queerness, participants are curious about each other's journeys. Namrata shares how she would like to know more about her potential partner's degree of outness to others, her levels of self-acceptance regarding sexuality and her comfort with public displays of affection,

> *"Of course, when you start getting close you start sharing. You ask about who all know about your sexuality, friends, family, do they know? Are you comfortable with yourself, are you comfortable with PDA? Lot of questions come up."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

Matters of queerness may often begin from a stigmatised place and take years to navigate in an authentic manner. Participants spent considerable time at this stage of the relationship sharing their gender-sexuality stories and holding them for each other. Tej shared that they are strengthened by how their relationship affirms their non-binary gender and Arti shared how swapping life stories helped her partner and her to recognise how important these journeys had been to their sense of self.

> *"The relationship with her has been extremely affirmative of my gender and it really strengthened my safety when it came to being more open and being stronger about saying who I am. In a personal space, in an interpersonal space even in a more public, community space which has been extremely hard to do and it is something I have struggled with all my life."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

> *"We both for various reasons, even though our life journeys have been very different, we both hold on to the identity of lesbian very dearly. Life trajectories have been very different but the holding on to that identity and keeping it close and dear and very meaningful is something similar in both of us."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

Thus, closure and affirmation received for that self-disclosure is different from cis-het relationships where matters of sexuality and gender are a given in terms of fitting the expected social norms. The importance of this cannot be stressed enough. Earlier studies have revealed that queer romantic relationships are often the only space where people can be their queer selves (LABIA, 2013; Sappho For Equality, 2016). This current study has added that 'sharing one's real self' through self-disclosure is an important aspect of the process of building intimacy. This happens by engaging with the additional content about gender- sexuality identities and journeys.

More participation in each other's life: Participants shared that they started making more time for each other. They started to prioritize the other person in different ways. They started doing more activities together and being more in communication on a regular basis: talking and messaging every day, listening to music together, going on drives, watching films, going out for dinners, cuddling. They began to get involved in what was important for each other and being in each other's company.

> *"Generally, we meet once a week, go for movies, meet for dinners, concerts. We chat. We talk once a day on phone at least because we both are working. Sometimes we meet twice a week."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

> *"Another would be listening to music when she drives. And over time I have these few playlists and we know which song comes after which. So, she is driving and I am sitting next to her playing songs and we are both just listening to songs and we start chatting about things. So those drives have also been this extremely intimate space, shared space. And in Bombay, she pointed this out once, that because this is Bombay let us see time spent on road as time spent together."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

Specific perhaps to the city of Bombay, given its heavy traffic and long distances, participants built intimacy travelling together as seen in Arti's quote above. Ananya too would love to accompany her girlfriend and just be around her when she went about her work and vice-versa. This participation in each other's work life brought them closer, and would make her feel that *"you are becoming a real part of my life."* Sap and Neel would often get into the same bus together and travel to each other's destinations even though they lived in completely different areas. This is how they spent all four years of college, travelling together and getting to know each other,

> *"We would take bus no. 373. College used to finish at seven pm and then walking up to the bus depot, get a bus in ten-fifteen minutes. Sometimes buses would be crowded so we would leave the bus, sometimes purposely just to get that extra time with each other. We used to reach home only at 8.30 or 9 [pm]. Sometimes talking to each other, sometimes just sitting silently beside each other watching outside the window and sometimes holding our hands beneath our bags hiding it from the people standing around in the bus. Time flew by. We didn't realise how four years had passed."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Even when both people were not in the same city, they found ways to spend time and be with each other. Ananya and Sharmila, lived in separate countries but even with the distance and differences in time zones, Ananya shares how they would be around each other,

> *"In terms of being around, we did that on Skype as well. Like for example if she's cooking, instead of hanging up and saying we will talk later, she would keep the call on. So, it is the same thing, we are in the same space, doing our own thing."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Labels for the relationship and each other: Starting to label what they shared was seen as part of building intimacy and happened in this stage. Mostly, at this stage, participants did not come out as a couple to other people, often anticipating a negative reaction from family and peers. This has been explored in detail in Stage Three in the section on Telling Others. In this stage, the labelling was more for themselves. The purpose of labelling was more to express what they felt for each other and validate these feelings rather than seeking acknowledgement or legitimacy from society. Popularly used labels were 'relationship' and 'couple' to define the relationship and terms like partner, girlfriend, spouse was used for each other.

> *"Partner. We are partners. We are in a relationship. We sometimes say we are a couple."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

Bonnie shares she is in a *"relationship"* with T and refers to her as her *"partner."* Bonnie also has another intimate equation with K that she terms *"loverly friends."* She describes what they share as,

> *"We are dominant submissive and we are a baby and a dog. She identifies as a baby and I have a natural mommy trait even though she is older than me and I am much younger, twenty-five years of age gap but it felt like it can happen. It just clicked from the first moment."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

Some participants used labels that specifically indicated that the nature of the relationship was not heterosexual, for example, lesbian relationship or queer relationship. Some labels like marriage were used but not as a replication or having the normative meanings. Participants used gender-neutral terms or gender-specific terms for each other and negotiated these labels so that they were reflective of gender-sexuality experiences of each person. Aisha preferred use of the term partnership because it was gender-neutral and therefore made space for her partner's non-binary gender which a term like lesbian relationship would have erased. Arti was keen to label the relationship as a lesbian one in order to foreground that it was not a heterosexual relationship,

> *"So, we would not want the L to get lost under the umbrella term of queer. That's another reason so whether it is within the community or outside of it we would like to make this assertion of lesbian and of being two women identified persons in a romantic relationship with each other. We are in a lesbian relationship and we are girlfriends."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

> *"My partner was also articulating gender; it was a process as well so saying girlfriend was not something I was saying. Significant other sounds like from the 1960s so partner is the word. I like what it denotes, I like the idea of partnership."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Some participants shared that labelling was a more complex matter because of the circumstances surrounding their couplehood. G and P were seeing each other but also in heterosexual marriages. This made it harder for them to access suitable labels because in the eyes of society, they both carried the label of 'married woman'. G says *"we used to hate saying we are best friends. We used to say soulmates (...) For me, it was like two waves coming together and becoming a bigger wave."* Ananya and Sharmila were in love but Sharmila was in a heterosexual marriage. In such a context, they were not sure how to label the love relationship they shared,

> *"What are we? Are we a relationship? See she had not hidden her marriage from me. I didn't come to know later. I always knew. So, we did not need to, want to have that conversation. When I accepted that I love her, that day also I did not think that I want her to leave everything and be mine or at some point we would live together. So, it was not that since day one that I had those ideas. For me it was in whatever way I could enjoy being in love and being loved (...) Her husband knew about me and my existence and he thought we were very close friends. And she told her best friend about me but again as a friend. So, because of the way our relationship was, from her end there was not going to be any labelling. From my end, my friends knew how I felt so there was no need to create a label. So, there was no labelling for the longest time."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Thus, in the face of dominant labels such as marriage and husband-wife, participants in heterosexual marriages found it harder to find labels for themselves. Even though G and P used the label soulmates for themselves, they had to continuously contend with being read as two heterosexual, married women who are best friends. This type of everyday erasure of intimacies is elaborated in Chapter Four in the section on Erasure of Queer Couplehood.

Stage Three- Sustaining a Romantic Relationship

This stage attempts to capture affirmations of togetherness and the investment in sustaining the relationship participants have with each other. Gaia (2002) writes:

> R. A. Lewis stated that emotional intimacy is "defined as mutual self-disclosure and other kinds of verbal sharing, as declarations of liking and loving the other, and as demonstrations of affections." Categorizing intimacy as a process Elaine Hatfield described it to be when we "attempt to get close to another; to explore similarities (and differences) in the ways we think, feel and behave. (p. 155)

Drawing on these definitions, this stage tries to capture the activities couples do together, how participants show love and how they nurture their romantic relationships. The subsections explore 'couple rituals', how participants show and experience feeling 'special', how they give and seek 'care' and how they experience their romantic relationship as adding 'goodness' to their lives. One subsection explores 'sexual intimacy' which is an important aspect of romantic relationships, including experiences of one participant who describes their relationship as asexual. The final subsections are on 'commitment rituals' that participants may have done at this stage of the relationship and 'telling others' about their couplehood.

Couple Rituals

Couple rituals are activities and routine things that couples do together, something that they consider their 'couple-thing'. "Rituals can be defined as special actions that help us navigate emotionally important events or transitions in our lives as well as enhance aspects of our daily routines to deepen our connections and relationships" (Gillespie & Petersen, 2012, p. 76). I explored what the couple did together which was an intimate experience for them. It ranged from the mundane to the festive, from the everyday to the very special. Going on holidays, drives, walks, excursions and 'dates'; sharing mundane household chores, grocery shopping; nonsexual cuddling, hugs and kisses; celebrating special occasions, giving gifts; spending time around each other, syncing schedules to increase time with each other; waking up to each other, sleeping naked together, showering together; sipping tea/coffee, cooking meals, eating together; sharing their

thoughts with each other, writing letters; taking photographs together; role-playing around gender were some of the couple rituals shared by participants.

In keeping with the politics of highlighting participants' experiences in their own voice, below are some descriptions of their couple rituals.

Aisha identifies cis-ish AFAB and queer. She is 29 years old.

> We finally started going on slightly longer holidays because that is what they would like to and I am all over the place. I think those longer holidays are romantic specifically because we get time away from the rest of the world, and the chaos and the mayhem and the animals and the politics. We are also very physically affectionate towards each other. Hugs, cuddles, kisses, just being in each other's vicinity, we sleep like that.
>
> There are also grooming rituals. Washing my hair takes like an hour. We decided that they would also come in the shower because that's one way to save water. What ended up happening was this bizarre thing of waiting for each other. So, on days when you have a half-hour shower or even on days when you are having a quick one, we just wait for each other. So, it has become this little capsule of time where you repeat something. I have also taken to experimenting on their hair with various hair products and they are pretty helpless in the shower so I win!

Ananya identifies female and lesbian. She is 33 years old.

> I love driving. It is one of the activities I enjoy the most. With all my partners I like this. I like them holding my hand, my one hand is always on the gear (...) They loved playing with my hair as I was driving and I enjoyed that. Or they would sleep on my shoulder. In all my relationships, I am the taller one and the bigger one so it is just easier for them to lean on me.
>
> Little things like pushing hair back because it has fallen on your face, or pushing your specs back because it has slipped down your nose. Or when you prepare a

place, for example, you will put a pillow because you know they will like that or carry a bottle of water or those little things that people know that you care for.

Arti identifies cis-woman and femme lesbian. She is 35 years old.

One of the things that over time started becoming special was having tea together. That became a ritual that became very soothing even if sometimes we were just sitting next to each other, me watching television, she playing on her phone, still there was a sense of togetherness and tea.

Another which I credit myself with is the ritual of, if we spend nights together, we sleep naked. And that feels awfully intimate. It is no commentary on whether sex will be had or not but just the feeling of skin on skin also feels very intimate and has become a couple ritual for us.

Bonnie identifies gender-queer and kinky & queer. She is 30 years old.

Very domestic things. We have a kitchen dance. T moves in an awkward way and I also follow that awkward dancing so that is our kitchen dance.

Nowadays we have balcony dates because we hardly have time. I am up all-night studying and she sleeps early. So, we have these balcony dates where we take time off and stand in the balcony for five to ten minutes. So, we just do that.

G identifies cis-woman and bisexual. She is 47 years old.

Every birthday we celebrate together since we met. Every birthday. Right in the early years our families did not know each other and they would have some celebration. But we used to make it a point to go out together, alone. We have to go. This is our day (...) So this birthday I gave her a bouquet of flowers and I selected each flower. Flowers are beautiful, fragile and fragrant also, it expresses my entire feeling for her and the kind of flowers I had selected, the colour is the one she loves very much and also, I love. So, it is an expression of something very tender.

We started syncing our children's classes together to spend the maximum amount of time with each other. So, we would go together, carry chai [tea] and spend time together.

Manu identifies non-binary and queer. They are 33 years old.

Coffee is a big thing. Morning coffee. Weekend breakfast she makes mirchi wale ande [eggs with chilly] and I make coffee. That is our morning. Because weekday mornings are usually rushed. So, weekend breakfast mornings. So scrambled eggs with hari mirch [green chilly] which you will not get in the US anywhere. That's why it becomes extra special.

When possible going to Bollywood music parties because she loves dancing. So, dancing together, cuddling and eating together are all very intimate for me.

Namrata identifies woman and lesbian. She is 32 years old.

Romantically, you have flowers, teddy bears, chocolates (…) in the three-year relationship there were lots of gifts. When she started working, she also gave me lots of gifts. So, it was not just me, she also. So gifting is part of showing love.

I kiss in restaurants; I am very free in public. It is not that always I am going to touch my girlfriend's hand but if a particular song is playing and after a few drinks you may want to give a peck or something or in Goa you can kiss on the beach also. Holding hands, hugging, kissing, I am comfortable with that.

Sap identifies agender and asexual queer. They are 46 years old.

Spending time together. Sharing our thoughts to each other. We have outings. We have lunch date once in a while. We go to a garden. We take a walk together. And also, photography, we love to click photos of nature, flowers, places we visit etc.

Earlier it was different and now it is different. In the initial stages it was more of poetry. I had told her that if you don't want to talk directly, you can write to me as she was a quiet person. So, she used to write. And I am someone who speaks more and I used to speak a lot and she would listen. Now it has changed. She can express a lot. So now I have to listen, it is my choice also and because I feel that she needs to vent out all the stress she is handling.

SC identifies gender-queer and queer. She is 42 years old.

We usually cook together. That is more or less the one ritual we do have. We cook together and when she cooks, she is really very patient, she is very aware, she is very mindful. She is one of those mindful slow cooks. I am like khatam karo kaam, bahaar jao kitchen se [finish the work and exit the kitchen soon]. I am that kind of a cook. It is fun to see us in the kitchen together. We have fun there.

Grocery shopping is one thing we both love doing together. Or we love eating street food together. Or when we are in a new place, we try and buy a book from that place. Both of us like this. I have a very funny habit and she makes fun of me every week as it happens once a week. I get all the sabjhi [vegetables] and I clean all of the sabjhi and I put them out to dry on a cloth. And she says, "Lag gyi mandi? Chalo ho gya." [Have you set up your market stall?] She loves teasing me about this.

Tej identifies non-binary and queer. They are 39 years old.

Sending her flowers, I would do that very often. Her neighbourhood flower guy, he knew me very well as a person who would call from another city and he would just send the flowers, no matter even if I took one or two days to put the payment in. And I would send her flowers randomly, not on occasions but just like that.

On the kink part, I had always been interested in handcuffs and restraints but so far none of the other people I had been with, had been interested. In this case, she was open and willing to go above and beyond that so I was able to explore many

things in kink, not just restraint and I found that I enjoyed it. We went far beyond restraint and it has been extremely exciting.

Specialness

An important aspect of intimacy in this stage was showing the person you love that they are special. An important element of feeling and showing specialness was that these expressions or activities were 'unique' only to their romantic partner. It is 'reserved' for them and not expressed in a similar way in other relationships. For example, Arti shares that she dresses up because her partner likes to gaze at her. Namrata says that a romantic partner will sometimes do activities with you even if that's not her preferred option. Manu shares that with a romantic partner, they don't have a *"threshold for irritation"* like they might have for friends and Sap shares that they would make hand-crafted gifts.

> *"I also try to dress up for her. I know she likes to look at me. She notices all the things I do including how I accessorise, what colour lipstick I am wearing, what dress I am wearing, what nose ring I am wearing, whether it's a ring or a stud so I try to put in effort always to make it worth her time to stare at me."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

> *"Also, was she okay doing things with you that she doesn't like very much but you like so she will go for that particular movie or sports and would you do the same for her?"* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

> *"So, for most people, I have a threshold beyond which I find them irritating but partners don't have a threshold for me. So that is how I would define intimacy in a romantic context."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"I used to make hand-crafted gifts for her. I used Plaster of Paris to make carving. It was NS, leaf-shaped monogram of our initials. The graphic of it is there on FB [Facebook]. So small small gifts handmade cards we used to give each other. We had less money and we would make these gifts by hand."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

A commonality across participants was their relationship to food. Cooking for, cooking together or being fed was described as special. This bonding around food could be attributed to the participant's assigned gender as many of them might have learnt cooking in their growing up years. Aisha shares that while she already liked to cook, cooking for her partner became a *"gesture"* of her love for them. Some couples experienced a

togetherness in the kitchen where they either cooked together or spent time together while one of them cooked. Being cooked for and eating meals together was considered special *"she would make like a dabba for me," "I love being fed, jab koi haath se khilata hai na, that is something else," "so sitting down for dinner together, watching something together."*

> *"I like to cook and I have become a significantly better cook. I knew how to put large amounts of bacon in a frying pan but then you meet someone who is vegetarian and they end up becoming your partner so now I have to learn. It has been a way for me to express so I have actually wanted to get better and trying new things because that's a gesture. So, cooking for them. I am very maternal so doing the whole fussing over someone and the immediate gratification I get from that. I put a plate of food in front of them, they eat it and they are thrilled."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Tej described *"sitting down at the table"* as a sign of intimacy and *"family time."* They attributed high value to it for the following reason. Families of origin often may not participate in a queer couple's life. Even families of origin that are attuned to each other and closely bonded may not always know how to participate in their queer child's life. This was reflected in a study done by Tata Institute of Social Sciences with family members, especially parents of queer children (Ranade et al., 2016). This absence is starkly felt by queer people. A vital and huge part of their life, their romantic partner, is often left out of family rituals. In the absence of heteronormative scripts to 'explain' the relationship between queer people, many queer partners continue to be treated as close friends but not family. For example, in a heterosexual marriage, a daughter's partner would always be understood as her legally married husband and there are several scripts through which families welcome him into the family and demonstrate belonging. The same is not extended to a queer partner, perhaps unintentionally, as there is no visible representation of how someone can become a family member without marriage. This loss is borne by the queer person. Tej's family has struggled with involving their partner as a family member. However, Tej has been able to draw upon childhood family rituals of eating together and make mealtimes with their partner (and chosen family) an important and loving family time,

> *"Sitting down to eat together at the table is intimacy for me. So that has been replicated in this relationship with her and with our other chosen family members. So that dinnertime is extremely important for me. Not sitting in front of a TV. And when we visit her home, when we have dinner with her family, that is something else that I love. So, there are memories from my childhood that stick out that were positive or may be rituals that are now values for me here. Sitting together as a family for meals in one of them. There is warmth, love. It is a thing that families do. It is important to give each other that time and sit with each other."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

Going to political protests together was an intimate experience for some participants who are politically inclined. Aisha and Bonnie share different reasons for why it is special for them. For Aisha, being queer has led her to queer-feminist politics and she is with someone who strongly believes in the same politics. Therefore, there is *"romance"* in sharing those politics together. For Bonnie, going to protests with T allowed the two of them to be *"scared"* together and this was possible because she did not have to *"perform in a relationship."*

> *"I think my idea of the world is skewed but that is also very romantic. To be in that space, in that space and know you have your partner there with you to participate with in these things. So, we also give each other flowers from time to time. So, there is the flowers and there is the protests on the streets. Both of those are romantic, the protests more but flowers are pretty."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

> *"Intimacy is happening now, in times of this upheaval. I have never before been to a protest with T. But I have been now, against the CAA*[12] *that happened in front of police HQ [headquarters] and being scared together, that does something to you. It might be negative but it does something to you… holding each other. Being scared because we don't have to always perform in a relationship."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

Specialness was shown in different ways and was 'unique' only to the partner. Queerness continues to play a role in how specialness is experienced and demonstrated.

Giving and Seeking Care

Caring was experienced as intimate and described as showing thoughtfulness, being attentive to small things and showing care in ways that were reserved especially for their

[12] Refers to citizen protests across India in late 2019-early 2020 against the CAA-NRC Laws enacted by the Central Government.

partner. So, the element of 'unique' is present here too, similar to the earlier point on specialness. Care was shown through gestures that conveyed attentiveness and a knowledge of their partner's needs, likes and dislikes. Care was also shown by tending to them a bit extra during times of ill-health or showing indulgence towards some of their habits.

> *"I demonstrate it through little things like that, trying to ensure the collars are not turned the wrong way or labels are not sticking out of the back of the neck or why are your glasses so dirty, let me clean them or what have you done to your hair, let me fix it. And why are you rubbing your eyes? I will put eye drops. So, I like organising the medical boxes or whenever they are travelling for a conference, I have to make the little skin-care and medical pouch, even if it overnight and that is my job."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

> *"If you are unwell then going meeting the person, making sure they take their medicines, all those things."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

> *"Sometimes, when she was living with her parents, she would have had a hard day and she may be wanting something and her parents wouldn't allow her to step out and at that time I have even tracked down late-night cigarette delivery and had it delivered."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

Bonnie shows care by reserving time for her partner which is only about the two of them. Bonnie has a relationship format with her partner in which she sometimes might be away on dates. However, she never keeps anything on weekends. When T has her therapy sessions, she makes sure there is food when T returns. This is something that Bonnie does of her own volition in order to convey that she cares because she knows it matters to T,

> *"And despite all the Tinder dates and all I do; I never keep anything on weekends. I would definitely make sure that I am at home on weekends. When she goes for therapy, I make sure that when she comes back there is food at home (...) She is not demanding this but when I have failed to cook when she's coming back from therapy then there are frowns and little bit of banging the bartans so I read into those signals."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

Seeking care: Participants shared that caring was reciprocated by partners. Participants felt cared for when partners noticed they were having a *"bad day"* or when they helped them work through confusions. Participants felt that they could seek care to express difficult emotional matters and or share their mental health concerns with their partners.

> *"They can see things and systems in the world that I cannot. Things that I do not understand, there is a point where they are the translation. Which helps me navigate spaces and understand what is happening. Especially bureaucratic spaces within or outside institutions, I don't understand them until the point this one is like, "Let me explain this system to you." So, there is a lot of grounding. When I have had a bad day, they will buy me a bottle of wine and I will cook dinner."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

> *"She really helped me to come to grips or to have agency over my own mental health (...) Because she is also someone who lives with mental health issues it was much easier for me to explore mental health, my own mental health and what mental health looks like in a relationship and how do you support and care for each other when both of you may be feeling distress."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

> *"What I feel I tell her. Sometimes I am misgendered and it feels horrible and I tell that to her because she is one person, I can talk to about this. Or if there is shitty work thing, anxiety about work things, I am able to express generally whatever it is."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

In certain matters, the romantic partner is the only one to whom matters of stigma and erasure can be taken, for example, the experience of being misgendered is a painful one and often a constant, or having to live with anxiety on an everyday basis. In the absence of support from traditional sites such as family and friends (and sometimes because of violence from them), romantic partners do take on this additional care-giving. It is common for queer couples to be the only support system for each other. It must be recognised here that queer couples already function without support or sanction to their couplehood. In addition, they have to take care of each other and sometimes for matters that arise purely out of a lack of acceptance of their queerness by society.

Experience of Goodness

A common theme across participant's narratives was a 'feeling of goodness' that the relationship had brought to them in different ways and how that had definitely added to the closeness and intimacy they felt with their partners. Participants felt valued and affirmed through experiencing authenticity, affection and healing with their partners. Experiencing goodness was usually connected to experiences of participants' gender-sexuality. Only too often, the romantic relationship was the only space that had been able to hold their stories and journeys in meaningful and celebratory ways. Being able to be authentic, not having to censor oneself or fearing any judgement was experienced as safe

and intimate. Aisha speaks of a sense of affection that she and her partner feel for each other, an affection that has persisted over time and experiences. And for Arti, her current relationship offered her girlfriend and her a way to heal with each other. Arti adds that her partner used to carry a lot of shame for being a masculine woman but in this relationship, she felt she could let her gender expression flourish.

> *"Just be, being myself with that person. This [wanting] has been with me for the longest time. I do feel misjudged a lot in life, taken for granted a lot so just feel that complete safe space, that complete, "Boss, this is me."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

> *"We spend inordinate amounts of time in each other's company. It is incredible that we are not fed up of each other. It has been four and a half years and of that the last two years I basically stare at their face for 330 days of the year and I am not bored yet. It is because I like them. I like them as a person."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

> *"We actually realised that with each other we are very different from previous relationships so that offered us the opportunity to see ourselves differently and there was a lot of healing. And that was also part of the intimacy where we slowly slowly over time felt that a lot of wounds were getting healed, over time we felt safer."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

Affirming gender: Being actively affirmed for their non-binary and agender identities has been strengthening for Tej and Sap. They elaborate how their partners uphold their gender experiences through their language and actions. For example, Tej shares how their partner uses not just the correct pronoun for them but also helps other people understand why using the correct pronoun is so critical to Tej's sense of self. Tej's partner is careful about which terms to use for body parts. This becomes necessary since the collapsing of gender and body in a binary world, associates body parts to certain genders and this may not reflect the experience of the participant. Using words like chest instead of breasts can help reduce distress or dysphoria that gendered body parts evoke,

> *"Using words for me that I would want to use for myself especially in intimate spaces, body parts that are more affirming and names for those. Other affirmations have been, taking up for me if some of my friends have not picked up on this before and were using an incorrect pronoun and she has sat down and explained. I don't have the confidence to do that, I feel too anxious to do it and so she has done it. As well as ask her family to call me by the right pronoun. For me personally, affirmation in the intimate space is what gave me strength to then do*

it in other interpersonal spaces and even in community settings." (Tej- they, queer, 39)

Sap also shares their journey with gender and how over time their partner is able to support them in some very crucial ways,

> *"After a few years, I wanted to know more about my gender. I don't feel like a woman. So, I thought maybe I am FTM. But I don't feel like a man. But I would like a flat chest, I do feel dysphoric. Earlier, she saw me as a woman. When I told her how I feel about my gender, initially she did not understand. Then I shared an article with her on gender identity and I told her there are more people like me. I am not the only one. Aisa hota hai, there are people who don't feel connected with their sex they are born in. She said, "I don't understand but I support you."*

Having made this declaration to support, Neel backed it up with ways to show her support and continues to do so till date. Sap shares,

> *"Marathi makes it very hard to speak in the gender that I feel. So, Neel and me, we made up a language when we text. It sounds like what people call 'gavthi Marathi' [dialect of Marathi] or better word is 'boli bhasha'. That is less painful for me. Marathi language has weightage, it has a 'sthaan' [weightage] and Marathi also changes from region to region. The words that we use could be more close to koli [fishing community] or tribal people speak, mostly considered 'ashuddh' [impure]. But I feel everybody's language should have weightage. One of Neel's friends who is a script-writer told me once, "Language is language, if it is good for you and you can communicate better with it, then it is good. Your value will not reduce." I wish everybody could think this way."*

Sap's experience throws light on how language itself is constructed in ways that do not reflect their gender experience. And when they found a dialect of Marathi that is affirming, that dialect is looked down upon in 'respectable society'. While these erasures continue for them on a daily basis, their partner Neel is able to create a space for their gender to be experienced more authentically,

> *"For example, it will be like, "Tu kaay kartu" [what are you doing] and here so the gender is not female or male. So, Neel and me, we text like that. Using these alterations in face to face conversations is harder. Because it is new to us, we are not used to it and so it takes practice. To learn anything, it is a matter of practice."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Many participants have lived for several years experiencing erasure and misrepresentation about identities that are core to their very being. They have had to experience silence and violence simply on account of who they essentially are. They have

had to self-censor, appear to fit in and live pretend lives for years on end in order to protect themselves. Thus, when they find partners who value them for who they are, it is deeply affirming. The power of these experiences, of being held, being affirmed, feeling safe and healing that contribute to a sense of goodness in the relationship, needs to be recognised. The labour of each person in the couple that goes into making their romantic relationship a space of goodness cannot be underestimated. Most queer people internalise the shame that comes from not fitting in and it takes years to unlearn that shame and value oneself. To then offer that same value to each other in a romantic setting is crucial queer labour that needs to be acknowledged.

Romantic relationships become affirming spaces for the queer person. Similar to the finding on 'intimacy as a space' in Chapter Four, the relationship space can offer authenticity, safety and a means to make sense of oneself and one's oppression. "Living without a history of your own kind is like living without the reassurance of a reflection in the mirror" (Sukthankar, 1999, p. xvi). In the absence of representation and reflection of themselves in everyday spaces around them, queer people search for queer spaces. What a queer space offers them is the opportunity to access stories, lives, role-models and ways of being queer. This helps queer people build a sense of identity for themselves (Anthony & McCabe, 2015). Participants share that both these types of intimate queer spaces- romantic and non-romantic- are crucial to their sense of queer self. Non-romantic intimate spaces include not only queer friends but also exes and chosen family. This is explored further in Chapter Six in the section on Navigating Endings.

Sexual Intimacy

Sexual intimacy was described by participants as having *"excellent chemistry," "connect," "compatibility"* and *"sex, lots of sex."* Sex was described as *"intense and pleasurable," "we connect sexually exceedingly well," "the intensity, the passion was crazy."* For most participants sex with their partners was good right from the start and as they grew closer, their sexual intimacy was enhanced. Ananya adds that sexual intimacy is heightened because of the strong feelings partners have for each other rather than just *"skill or talent"* while having sex. This overlap of emotional and sexual intimacy was

experienced by most participants. Exploration of each other's bodies, making out, penetration, oral sex, orgasms, using toys, role-playing, exploring kink were all described as sexual experiences of an intimate nature. At all points, participants reiterated that sex with their partners was always consensual.

> *"She would come if I would just touch her. She has come when we have been on the phone not even while having sex but while I have been expressing my feelings and she has gone crazy. So, because of that I believe that when you feel so strongly, coming is just another way of our body reacting to your feelings. Obviously, there is skill and talent while having sex but still I feel it has to do a lot with your bonding, your intimacy than purely talent. To answer what is sexual intimacy, for me it would be the whole process going from making out to playing with the body to penetration to everything."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Some participants shared that sexual intimacy deepened at this stage. A sense of comfort and safety enhanced sexual exploration and therefore sexual pleasure with each other. SC shares that the initial one year of their sexual life was not easy. Because of her own inexperience, she was perhaps not able to open up as much. With time, this changed,

> *"Neither of us wanted to hurt the other person, at the same time we were quite interested, at the same time we wanted to explore, it was a mix of all of that. So, it was like, "Yeh karu toh galat toh nhi manegi?" "Woh karein toh usko acha lagega kin hi lagega?" Bahut performance pressure tha! I came with a blank mind, zero mind, kuch pta hi nhi tha, so I wasn't very clear ki kya hoga, kya nhi hoga. So, there was anxiety as well. So, I would push her away sometimes and she would feel hurt by that but I wasn't very clear about what's going on (...) Our sex life actually started more after year one. It became more intense, more exciting. We started understanding each other's cues, that began more after one year I would say."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

In the initial stages, Arti and her girlfriend had sex keeping in mind one's own individual comfort and safety but as trust and togetherness began to build, they were able to able to explore much more with each other's bodies and pleasures,

> *"This was also a space where both of us were feeling safe enough to step out of our ideas of how each one could have sex with the other. For example, the ideas we have about what constitutes active and what constitutes passive or what does it mean when one penetrates the other and we were really able to step out of that and really explore all that was on offer without having to pick and choose based on our comfort and safety, which we did in the beginning, definitely we did in the beginning."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

A comfort with one's own body, gender and sexuality can often be a vexed matter, taking years to unlearn the shame that is attached to non-heterosexual pleasure (Meenu & Shruti, 2012). At all points in the sexual intimacy-building process, participants have shown a consideration towards each other's comfort and safety. Ananya shares that in her first relationship, she only tried to follow what she had seen in films. However, she adds that because they were both *"girls"* it was safe and over time they figured what they both wanted *"we were both young and we took our time but there was this thing about spend enough time on 1st base, then 2nd base then 3rd base. There is a system and you only follow that. It was safe, it was fun and it took its own time."* SC shares *"it took us a long time, rather it took me a long time. She was really very patient. She was really very sweet and patient, I must admit."* Participation of both partners in figuring out how to build a comfortable and enjoyable sex life was evident in many narratives.

Roles: Some participants elaborated on what roles they might prefer while having sex while others shared that not having prescribed roles added to the pleasure and intensity. It is important to note here that sexual roles are not viewed as a replication of heterosexual acts (Green, 2010). "Most women said they never engaged in butch-femme behavior, either sexually or in other aspects of their relationship. This, of course, contrasts markedly with heterosexual couples in which male and female partners often enact gendered social and sexual roles" (Peplau et al., 2004, p. 364). Roles are based on participant's pleasure and satisfaction as well as exploring with their partner about what their desires and needs are. Manu identifies queer and non-binary and Namrata identifies as lesbian and woman. They describe themselves as enjoying being the *"provider"* and *"giver."* Their narratives indicate that they have learnt to be *"versatile"* and able to *"receive"* or *"take"* from someone special.

> *"I think I am more of a provider. I am not as comfortable at receiving stuff being done to me. My pleasure is in the response to my pleasuring. That turns me on a lot. If that doesn't happen then kuch nhi hota mereko [I am not turned on]. The person can touch wherever they want, however they want par kuch nhi hota mereko. I guess I am not versatile. I have learnt to receive over time and over multiple relationships but I definitely find pleasure in the response to my pleasuring. For me turn on is specifically in the auditory response. Someone who likes my touch and whose touch I like."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"I am more of a giver. So, I would like someone who can take but if the person likes to give and if I really like the person then I am okay with her giving. I am versatile but more on the giving side."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

With G, who has had heterosexual sexual experiences, she found that when with a woman, she felt *"more like a woman"* than in any heterosexual context. She shares how she and P never tried to fit any roles. Their love-making was about exploring and pleasuring each other and there was a certain ease they felt with each other's bodies,

> *"We never tried to fit any roles, P and I. With P, I felt more like a woman. That doesn't mean I was in the submissive mode but I just felt like a woman much more. I was a woman-on-top kind of a person. We were able to explore much more, we were happy to explore much more. Much more in terms of sexual expression, with each other, what pleasures who. We have even spoken about the fact without experiencing each other before, how do we know to pleasure each other, how do we know the right spot, the right way without experimenting?"* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

Kink: Participants did not feel restricted by heterosexual sexual norms and roles and some explored sex toys, power, role-playing and kink. This added to their experience of sexual intimacy. Participants shared that their partners recognised and respected each other's journeys with bodies and gender. Tej shared how their partner using certain names for certain body parts, helped affirm their gender. They add *"using kink, playing around then with both gender and kink. And so that has been very affirmative."* This affirmation goes a long way in building sexual comfort, safety and intimacy.

> *"We have an interesting collection of sex toys. We have both had a proclivity for collecting them and then we just found each other. I am trying to figure out how to answer that. Sex is about power. That is very exciting to me. That is something that both of us have wanted to examine in more detail until we tried figuring it out with each other. The fact that there are no roles per se translates into this. No fixed ideas or patterns. It has never been about, "How can we spice this up?"* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Bonnie identifies kinky and queer and her insights on kink help broaden an understanding around it,

> *"In BDSM, it may be erotically charged and very intimate but not necessarily sexual. For example, beating someone up and then taking care of them afterwards is a very intimate thing but it is not sexual but it is erotically charged. It is a*

> *normative concept that intimacy comes from relationships only. This is something I realise only now. With BDSM what happens is that you get a token of it in a moment…it is like a tequila shot. If you have your consent exchange in place then it is beautifully intimate. Kinky people are the best of friends. No games and no judgements. In a relationship you can be judged for your choices ki that is normative but in kinky spaces there is absolutely no judgement or maybe I am mingling with people who are like-minded. In the BDSM scene I try to keep my people as diverse as possible. I have never been judged for anything, that is the magic of BDSM for me."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

Intimacy in an asexual relationship: Sap describes the relationship with Neel as *"a queer romantic relationship."* They added that their relationship does not involve sex. Sap's narrative throws some light on intimacy in an asexual relationship about which we have even less knowledge or information,

> *"We learn from the movies so after college we tried to be physically intimate. So, cuddles, kisses we did but beyond that she wasn't comfortable and I too wasn't sure if I wanted or not then. Whatever it is, this has not affected our intimacy. As time has passed, each day we grew closer and closer may not be physically but surely, I can say we understand each other's moods, know when to talk what and when not to. We still share every thought in our minds to each other and that has been very important for us. So emotional bonding for me is intimacy."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Resolving Difficulties and Negotiating Differences

Some reasons for difficulties arising between couples are because of differing expectations around emotional expressiveness, individual habits or differing ideas about the relationship format.

> *"But I don't speak a lot so this was again a moment of lots of tussle between us. She would say if you don't say, how will I understand? And she is right but I would not be able to tell. Bichari, phas gayi mere saath [She got stuck with someone like me]. That was very difficult for her. Bahut ghusaa aata tha usko [She used to get terribly angry]. Then I would not know what to do when someone acts like that. So, I don't take the emotional cues very easily. Mujhe samajh nhi aate [I don't understand emotional cues]. There was lot of learning that happened."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

Manu and Laila had to figure out sleeping arrangements because Manu tends to snore and this would disturb Laila's sleep. They both loved to cuddle, fall asleep and wake up in each other's arms. However, given their work demands, sleep was equally important so

they worked it out between them to accommodate both Manu's romantic nature and Laila's practical nature,

> *"We have to sleep separately because I snore and she is a very light sleeper and even with earphones sometimes she can't sleep next to me. So, weekdays, we sleep separately. So, we cuddle together but sleep in separate bedrooms. What to do? When I snore, her sleep gets disturbed, then she moves around in bed and my sleep gets disturbed. So, there was some conflict around this. She is more practical and I am more romantic. So, I was like noooooo, I want to sleep with my partner. So, she was like if we are living together and both of us need to go to our jobs and she has a very demanding job as well. So, what we would do is cuddle before sleeping and then cuddle on waking up and that was good enough, I guess to work around it."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

While these examples may appear to be 'routine' couple concerns, it must be recognised that the queer couple functions without any support from relatives and friends to resolve their difficulties. Therefore, it can often be a lonely struggle for the couple to work through their differences. Arti and her girlfriend had some initial differences regarding being in a relationship. When Arti met her potential partner, she was keen to be in a relationship but at that time, her girlfriend wasn't very forthcoming about discussing what the relationship should be like. Arti describes that this was a setback and though they did start a relationship, it took about six months before she was convinced that her girlfriend was invested in their relationship. To cope with the differences in relationship format, Arti put in some self-protective measures, in the absence of external support to figure this out,

> *"Haan, because in my head, I did withdraw a little bit. Instead of laying myself so open and bare, I had put in a few safeguards in place, "That if this doesn't work out, I can get out of it" or "If this doesn't work out, I'll find somebody else". So, when she did say that I don't want to have any boundaries anymore and I'd like us to take this forward as a relationship, I was for the longest time still functioning on that earlier bit, maybe from a place of hurt, I don't know. I needed to make sure that this person really means it and not feel so exposed or so defenceless again and so I had taken several steps back. So, it was set back. Not that I feel bad about it anymore but that time I did feel bad and she had to bear the brunt of it for about six months. I never really gave in completely for about six months."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

Often couples face difficulties because of factors that are external to their relationship, introduced into the couplehood on account of the larger social stigma. Since the couple

functions without a social script on how to 'do relationships', it requires more effort to figure out each other's concerns, meanings and differences. Bonnie describes how she was very keen initially that T shares about their relationship to her parents. However, she had to take into account that if T comes out to her parents, it would have negative consequences for T and she did not want that to happen. She was able to express her anger and frustration about the situation as well as recognise that this was not a couple issue but arising out of the larger stigmatising society that we live in,

> *"But now my parents know about us and hers don't. And I used to create a ruckus about it because as queer individuals you are less acknowledged and to get relationships acknowledged also there are struggles. But then I thought about it a lot and thought that I really don't want her parents to create trouble for her. If that means that they don't need to know then let them not know. I have expressed my anger and frustration enough and if they don't know it is fine."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

Consideration and *"kindness"* for each other's differences, an *"intention"* to *"understand each other"*, *"respecting"* each other's opinions, self-reflection, changing some of their behaviours, putting in some self-protective measures, giving each other time, showing patience towards each other, building empathy for each other's situations and believing in their love helped participants resolve difficulties and negotiate differences.

> *"We were not mean people. We were not mean to each other. We were not unkind to each other. It was not that we were at each other's throats. It was more like; she doesn't understand me. We wanted to be understanding to each other. Once the intent was there, let us see what happens. Let us take it one day at a time."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

> *"Being able to speak to each other about easy things and difficult things and being able to, even if we disagree, feeling strongly about each other at the end of it. So, fighting but being able to set it aside and feel that I want to sit next to you and hold you even though we had a difficult conversation."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"It is not that we don't have differences, we do, we fight as well but we don't let our fights cross limits. We have our own opinions about certain things which differ. And we do respect them."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Bonnie shared that when T and she were initially not able to hold the same meanings of *"exchanging rings"* for each other, there was a lot of hurt. But that did not mean that Bonnie did not believe in what T and she shared and over time she was able to consider that a couple can have different meanings about the same event,

> *"I am not going to dismiss what was there because she wasn't ready and I curse her and will continue to do it for the rest of my life if I have to but I don't want to disown her. I can understand that people might not be ready and it is hurtful but there is nothing you can do about it. You can be there with them and help them figure ki kya chahte ho bhai samajh lo. My therapist also helped me understand this a lot. T was forced into a heterosexual marriage. These markers are very different for her meaning-wise so I cannot blame her."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

SC's narrative shows how self-reflective she is and the work she put in to change her ways in order to be more emotionally responsive during times of distress,

> *"I also identified myself and not just in this relationship, in general as well when I wouldn't communicate at the right time. And communicating it at the right time would have averted a lot of other things. By nature, I am a very rigid person and if she is hurt, I can't use logic. It is a simple thing. I have to be emotional to understand her. But I would use logic. Toh bechari she would say why can't you understand that I am hurt? So, to get to this, that this is what she is saying took me a lot of time. So that emotional intelligence was not there. So, I can say that my emotional intelligence has grown while I have been in this relationship. That is my greatest takeaway from this relationship."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

Bonnie also reflects on how a range of emotions need to be expressed in a relationship and she cannot expect only certain expressions,

> *"Now of course I also understand that in a relationship, person needs to express. Earlier T had an aggressive body language but now it is much less. But now I understand that you can't not allow them one domain of emotion and say bye."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

Participants added that negotiations made to figure out differences often presented an opportunity for growth for oneself as seen in SC's narrative above. Tej describes how they supported their current girlfriend and their ex to become comfortable with each other. Now they are all at a place that they share really strong bonds and this is something to cherish,

> *"And it has been hard but loving each other and caring for each other, banking on each other, the trust that you have is important in these negotiations and we*

> *did this in a variety of ways including holding space for each other, going to a therapist together. And making allowances for when the person may be feeling extremely vulnerable (...) It can have hiccups obviously and even more so in the beginning but if you have feminist values, if you are cognizant of what care and respect looks like these things are possible and then you are all the more luckier for it."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

Two of the ten participants mentioned that they had been able to take their couple difficulties to therapists. On the whole, many couples did not have familial or other supports that is otherwise available to cis-het couples to resolve their difficulties (Kurdek, 2005). This current study seems to indicate that participants strove to resolve difficulties and differences in harmonious ways, in line with Kurdek (2005) "partners from gay and lesbian couples handle conflict more positively than spouses from heterosexual couples do because they value equality more and have fewer differences in power and status between them" (p. 252).

Commitment Rituals

In the absence of socially sanctioned rituals to formalise a queer romantic relationship, I was curious to know if participants had had any commitment rituals. Some participants had exchanged rings. Aisha narrates how much effort she put into buying *"practical rings"* that would suit both of them in their occupations as well as their gender expressions,

> *"Rings are a nice gesture. So, I spent a long time looking and found something called carbon fibre. It is non-reactive so I can stick my hand in whatever chemicals I want. These are super light and super thin so the ring won't get in the way of their work. I spent a very long time on this."*

Finally, the rings were ordered all the way from Utah, USA to India but when they arrived, Aisha has a funny incident to narrate about how the actual exchange happened,

> *"Well when the rings came, I screwed it up. I was on my period and I was bloated and so I thought it wasn't fitting. And I threw their ring at them saying, "Quick, try it on. It may not fit." And then they said it does fit and I realised mine fits too and that was that! I think they were a little upset then because they wanted a little something more romantic but oops."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

For this couple, these rings signify commitment.

> *"Rings…I like this. It is always there. It reminds me of you all the time.*" (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

For G and P, though they were both in heterosexual marriages, their commitment to each meant a lot to them. G and P planned a future together. For this couple, their commitment was celebrated by believing in a future and starting a venture together,

> *"We actually wrote down. One of the things we wanted to do together was open an old age home. We used to talk about growing old together, having this old age home. We had drawn sketches of how it would be. We had bought a drawing book especially for that. Let's have a vision board, we said. We had also started our own, something like an NGO, a counselling centre called A****. The choice of the name, the colours to choose, actually getting the entire logo designed, printing cards, printing our names on it."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

Some participants shared that they had not done any rituals yet but have a desire to do so.

> *"So, there is a sweet spot for some sort of commitment ceremony type thing. So, there is that part of the script, I guess. We have talked about it in passing. I think both of us like the idea of having a small ceremony with friends particularly and some close family but not in terms of timeline."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

Sap describes their celebration on completing twenty-five years together,

> *"When we completed our twenty-fifth silver jubilee in 2017, we had well planned it as it was special for us. We brought new clothes and rings for each other one week in advance. Neel wore a grey kurti and black leggings. I was in a white shirt and black trousers and jacket. We had exchanged silver rings, went for a lunch date and we celebrated our special day together, just the two of us."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Commitment with someone when intimacy is high was desired however marriage which is an important marker of commitment in heterosexual relationships, was not replicated to express commitment. In fact, most participants strongly rejected the heteronormative script of marriage and saw no connection between commitment and marriage at all. Ananya shares *"the whole part of having the wedding is when your people get together to celebrate the commitment you have for each other. So, I want to have a wedding. I may not want to get married."* These commitments made to each other are sustained without legal and social sanction or any public celebrations of the couplehood. For example, if we contrast how silver jubilees of heterosexual married couples is usually celebrated to how

Sap and Neel celebrated, it clearly shows the discrimination meted out to queer couples. Despite this, Sap and Neel marked their twenty-five years together with so much love and specialness. Their intimacy with each other continues to remain intact without external support.

Telling Others

One aspect of intimacy at this stage was about participants making their romantic relationship known to others. Couples felt safer coming out to queer friends, queer groups they were part of, exes or chosen families who were able to value their couplehood. Some were open on social media about their relationship after ensuring *"privacy settings"* to make sure that only safe and supportive friends could access their profiles. Few had come out to their parents, straight friends or straight colleagues. Participants shared that they were often not out as a couple to straight people, or at workplaces or to parents/family members. Other studies have similarly highlighted the role of homonegativity and why it becomes difficult to come out as a couple (Kurdek, 2005).

Arti, Namrata and Aisha share how they received acknowledgement for their couplehood from queer friends, some family members and straight friends.

> *"There are people who have known me for years in a particular LBT collective but I had disappeared for a while and she has been part of it for a long time. So, people were happy to see us together, they see us as a couple and so that is where the couplehood got affirmed."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

> *"Facebook pr daal diye the bahut saare photos, itna markers tha [Had uploaded many photos of us on Facebook]. My sister knew, my cousins knew, my family knew. Her siblings knew, her mom had some idea, friends knew. People around us knew. They would treat us like a couple, like my friends would say why don't you get your girlfriend also. If they had her number, they would message her also personally. The people who knew would invite us."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

> *"In Delhi, we stay with my parents and my sister when she is around. And partner is very much part of the family and has been fully recognised as such. There is a natal family that I have also chosen because of the way they engage with me and my partner."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

On the other hand, some participants who have told straight friends and family found that not much was forthcoming about acknowledging their couplehood. This aspect has been explored some more in Chapter Six in the section on Meet the Parents. Sap shared *"I came out to my sister and slowly I told on some family WhatsApp groups about me and that Neel and me are a couple around four-five years back. But yesterday, they did not wish for anniversary."* Couples felt safer being more open to queer friends and received higher validation for their romantic relationships from queer community. Similar to this finding, a study by Dudley et al. (2005) revealed that same-sex couples commonly experienced homonegativity from general societal sources and family of origin. Additionally, some couples experienced homonegativity from religious and legal sources (Kurdek, 2005, Oswald, 2001).

Stage Four- Ending a Romantic Relationship

This stage is not an inevitability but it did need to be explored as three participants shared how and why their intimacies with their partnerships ended. The stories of separation and endings is sadly far too common in the queer community (LABIA, 2013; Mokkil, 2011). When heterosexual relationships end, the reasons are often clearer: the couple may have fallen out of love, they may not be compatible or they may have differences that are unbridgeable. Participants however shared that their relationships ended because it was forced by circumstances related to sexuality or due to the lack of social sanction for the relationship.

Forced by Circumstances

In Ananya's story, her partner was already in a heterosexual marriage before they met and fell in love. Despite several attempts to leave the heterosexual marriage, social pressures invoked by the legal spouse made it impossible for Sharmila to find a way to be with Ananya. After five years of being together, they parted ways. Ananya is very clear that this did not end because of a lack of love. But after five years it seemed impossible to continue in a long-distance relationship with someone who was continuing to be in a heterosexual marriage. Therefore, this ending seemed forced by circumstances.

In G's story, both G and P were (and continue to be) in heterosexual marriages. They lived in the same housing society and that is how they met and fell in love. They were together for about three to four years. Then P ended the relationship when her husband accidentally came to know about her relationship with G. G shares,

> *"So, the relationship ended means the physical intimacy ended. It just ended. It was stopped from her side. So, the physical intimacy ended. Any expression of love was rejected. Even the smallest things like cards and stuff. There was a day she called me over and said these are all the cards you gave me, take them away."*

Again, the relationship seemed to have a forced end because of circumstances surrounding their domestic/marital realities and not necessarily because they fell out of love,

> *"There was too many complexities happening in her life, in her home plus this complexity happening. Maybe it was easier for her to handle that than this. May be because, I don't know, she was in a marriage, she had two children, handling this intimacy would have been like taare varchi kasrat [tightrope walk] for her. Now there is no physical intimacy but I still feel the connect, I feel the same love and it is not that it is not there. It is a very strange thing; I don't know how to put it."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

Morality About Sexuality

Just these two stories above, give an insight on why many loving queer relationships are forced to end because of the social context around them. Particularly, when it comes to persons assigned gender female at birth, a certain morality controls their sexuality (CREA, 2012; Fernandez, 2003). A heterosexual marriage to a cis-man seems to be the ultimate destination. SC shares how hard and for how long she resisted heterosexual marriage but incessant pressure from her family made her enter a heterosexual marriage which she later divorced,

> *"However different, accepting and understanding parents might be, ultimately they want the girl to be married off. That is the end goal for a woman's life. That has been a huge tussle for me. Compared to other families, I can say that my parents have been far more liberal in many other ways but it was like, ek umar tak aap kuch bhi kar lo, uss umar ke baad hum kahenge, aap sunenge [upto a certain age you are free but after that you have to obey us]."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

Several women may already be in a heterosexual marriage with a cis-man before they even become aware of their sexuality. Therefore, by the time women discover their love for other women, several are married. That marital reality becomes a barrier to continuing their queer romantic relationship. It sometimes becomes a barrier in exploring one's own sexuality. In our society, there is absolutely no visible representation of queer AFAB persons being able love each other and be a couple. This makes it very hard, especially for persons assigned female at birth, to imagine a life that offers possibilities of being able to be with the person she loves. Ananya shares how Sharmila repeatedly expressed her desire to leave her heterosexual marriage and come live with her. But she was also uncertain. She felt she needed to figure her sexuality and *"figure herself out"* before taking that step because she was afraid for her future, if things didn't work out between them *"I don't want to be in a situation where I leave him for you and then what if this is not really there."* G shares that despite the intense love and intense times spent together, P would still cast doubts on what is it that they really share,

> *"So, whenever we had the time to be with each other, we would be very into each other, almost oblivious to everything else. But when that time used to end, the reality used to hit us so much. So, we used to have, rather she used to say that we should not be like this because after that we fight. So, she used to say that after having such beautiful moments if we are getting into a jade [fight] mode then whatever we were having was not meant to be."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

Other stories from the queer community provide further evidence to such forced endings. Partners are physically separated from each other by family or couples die by suicide. Some make suicide pacts, leaving love notes that they 'left this world to be with each other' (Mokkil, 2011). Believing that they live in a society where their love would never thrive, many queer couples would rather die together, to mark their love and couplehood. "Suicide becomes the dark act of 'coming out', where the couple becomes established through dying together" (ibid, p. 392).

This chapter describes the intimacy experiences of queer participants in their couplehood. In stage one of seeking a romantic relationship, participants described the spaces in which they found love though the norm for relationships is heterosexuality and the assumption is that everyone is heterosexual. Love was unexpectedly found in everyday spaces such as workspace, college and neighbourhood. Despite a gender-segregated society like ours, where 'female friendships' are common, participants always knew when their feelings towards someone were of attraction and not friendship, though they may not have been able to articulate that difference aloud. When participants had been able to come in contact with the queer community, queer spaces and queer events provided an opportunity to meet someone.

Participants shared that ease of conversations, the other person's physical attractiveness or a match in political ideology were some of the reasons that interest was sparked. Having met someone they were attracted to; how did participants convey that interest? Participants had to exercise caution while expressing themselves because of 1) assumed heterosexuality of both persons, 2) not enough scripts on how to go about this and 3) anticipation of a negative outcome due to social stigma of non-heterosexual attractions. Participants talked of tentativeness and strategy in conveying interest. Consent was intricately navigated. They looked for clear signs of reciprocation and consent from the other person before taking this attraction forward.

In stage two of starting a romantic relationship, participants considered how to take the attraction forward into a relationship. Some participants simply fell in love, while others met someone that matched their idea of a partner and so they decided to give the relationship a try. Most participants looked for explicit consent in starting a relationship and would have let go of the attraction if clear signs were not forthcoming from the other person.

Once the relationship began, how did participants take it ahead in this stage? Those who don't fit that norm often have gender-sexuality journeys that are quite complex. There is much diversity and a certain uniqueness to each person's journey and meaning-making. Therefore, self-disclosure, an important process in this stage, carried this additional

content of information about gender-sexuality journeys that does not come up in cis-het relationships. Participants shared that they started making more time for each other and doing activities together. At this stage, the couple may begin to label what they share. The labelling was more for themselves. Labels were used to give their intimacies a name and meaning, to express how they feel for each other. Couples chose labels that indicated that the queer nature of their love and were also respectful of gender identities of self and/or partner.

In stage three of sustaining a romantic relationship, participants shared how they affirmed their togetherness. Couples shared certain intimate rituals; time and effort was put into taking care of each other; conveying how the partner was special to them and creating spaces to nurture and affirm. Sexual intimacies deepened and an overall sense of goodness and growth for both partners was experienced. This stage also described how difficulties were resolved and differences negotiated. Some couples had done commitment rituals. It is important to recognise that couples often were quite alone in their journeys, for the following reasons 1) families did not know how to include them as family members, 2) couples did not have visible representation/role models on doing relationships and 3) their couplehood did not receive social or legal sanction. In addition to this, each person in the couple often faced erasure and violence from sources outside the two of them. Couple difficulties often arose because of factors related to social stigma. Couples, therefore, had to do the additional labour of holding and valuing each other's real selves, protecting and healing each other from stigma and investing in holding the relationship together without formalising it.

In stage four of ending a romantic relationship, often relationships end due to complex circumstances that arise out of how matters of gender and sexuality are arranged in our society. Queer persons who are assigned female at birth face particular pressure of heterosexual marriage in their early to mid-twenties. Marital reality therefore becomes a barrier in continuing a romantic relationship with the person they love. Morality and control over their sexuality becomes a barrier in exploring one's sexuality or imagining

possibilities for oneself as a couple. This often contributes to why many loving couples end their relationships.

The next chapter explores how queer people engage with dominant social norms, similar or different ways of doing their relationships and what the queer couple draws upon to guide them on being together.

Chapter 6: Departures from the Norm

Social norms are an overarching presence in each person's life, cis-het or queer. "As such, heteronormativity exists as a powerful structuring force in our lives and is reflected through numerous social structures and institutions such as marriage, monogamy, and parenting" (Pfeffer, 2012, p. 577). Thus, heteronormativity 'shows the way' to cis-het people on how to chart their intimacies. Olson (1981) describes intimacy as a process. In an intimate relationship there is an expectation of reciprocity and the intimacy to occur and persist over time (ibid). There are certain milestones that indicate the building of intimacies: couples begin to label themselves as a couple and they start sharing with others that they are seeing each other. When intimacies have to be taken further, the couple is introduced to each partner's parents and close family. Ultimately, intimacies are consolidated through marriage. Most cis-het relationships follow this trajectory from dating to marriage "(...) they use these relationships to look for company, emotional security, intimacy, and the feeling of love they provide, until they reach a stage when they are ready to take decisions over questions of long-term commitment, such as cohabitation and marriage" (Gómez-López et al., 2019, p. 2). In Indian society, dating may not always be a possibility as marriages are arranged by families but these definitely include meeting each potential partner's family, discussing the terms of the marriage and living arrangements for the couple after marriage whether as a nuclear unit or with in-laws. For all heterosexual relationships, whether partners are dating or married, socially-approved labels and relationship scripts to define their intimacies is always available. This chapter throws light on how queer intimacies are built and consolidated in the absence of these socially-approved milestones and in a social context that devalues their intimacies. "Weddings thus infuse one kind of relationship (heterosexual marriage) with tremendous legal and religious privilege while implicitly derogating other ways of being in the world" (Oswald, 2001, p. 41). Drawing from literature, this chapter looks at some dominant norms from queer locations. I have titled these 1) Labelling Intimacies 2) Meet the Parents 3) Living Together 4) (Un)Doing Marriage 5) 'Doing' Queer Relationships and 6) Navigating Endings.

Labelling Intimacies

Labels carry meaning. They help with naming and defining what the two people share with each other and how they refer to each other in a romantic context. Normative labels to define intimacies are marriage and husband-wife. The meanings built into them are quite evident: the intimacies are heterosexual and the couple is made up of a cis-man and a cis-woman. Thus, many participants found that these terms were not applicable to their realities. In fact, for some participants, they carry painful memories of forced heterosexual lives and hence applying the same terms to their queer intimacies was hard. SC shares,

> *"To be honest, I did not care much about those labels: marriage, husband, wife, partner. The relationship is always important, the person is always important but I never gave it a label. And because I had an experience of an heteronormative marriage which didn't work, which I never should have entered into even otherwise, independent of all of this. I have always been very, how do I say this? I have always had a very clouded judgement when it came to marriage."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

For some participants, access to labels and language to describe what they share was not readily available in a predominantly heterosexual context. In such an absence, labelling can become confusing and hard. When Sap and Neel met in 1992, they had no access to the Internet. And till 2008, they had no knowledge of any queer community *"humme lagta tha sirf hum dono hi hai [we used to believe that it's just the two of us like this]."* They did not have any labels or representation to describe their love. Sap shares how they used to try and make sense of what they shared,

> *"So how we used to relate that we are a couple is that when we saw films, we would relate to the couple in the film. Hamare pyaar ko define kaise kare? So the love of the hero-heroine was the love we felt. But not stereotypical but that love feeling we could relate to."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

In the absence of queer representation, queer people initially draw on normative labels that exist around them but recognise its inadequacy to capture their realities authentically. For example, in the earlier quote Sap and Neel drew their meanings from Bollywood representations of love but recognised that the two of them are different from the man-woman model of love.

As seen in Chapter Five, labels were negotiated between the partners based on their sexuality and especially gender journeys. Participants who identified non-binary or were with people who identified non-binary, used more gender-neutral labels such as "*in a relationship"* or *"we are partners."* Participants who were cis-identified, especially if they were gender conforming in appearance felt that they need to use more gender-specific labels such as lesbian and lesbian relationship so as to *"not get subsumed under heterosexuality."*

> *"We are both queer and feminist and queer-feminist and we are both equally tired of the word queer and partner being appropriated in only political ways and has nothing to do with lived realities of marginality which actually prevent access to these terms. So, we very consciously and without even discussing, we call each other girlfriends. We see each other as girlfriends because we would like the gender to be highlighted. To really foreground the lesbian part of this whole thing."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

When Sap and Neel first met each other, Neel saw Sap as a woman. Some years ago, Sap began to articulate their gender and Neel supported them in this journey. Initially, the couple understood themselves as a *"lesbian relationship"* but now describe themselves as a *"queer romantic relationship."* This indicates that gender-sexuality journeys are often ongoing and labels used for oneself and one's intimacies may change with these journeys and with the emergence of new language through visibility of queer lives.

Some participants may sometimes use normative labels but were very clear that it did not carry the normative meanings.

> *"I think we were more or less on the same page of calling each other partners rather than saying that she is the husband and she is the wife. We were very clear, both of us that neither of us is the man in this. We were very clear about it. So, our meanings about marriage were different from the heteronormative."* (SC-she, queer, 42)

Some participants built a totally new meaning into it. Tej sometimes refers to their partner as *"wife,"* but it does not translate into the normative meaning of marriage, gender roles or gendered bodies. For them, the meaning it carried was being able to experience themselves as a masculine person in their romantic relationship,

> *"I do have another label now. About two years into our relationship, we exchanged rings. After that I do tend to call her my wife. It is fun and flippant. Because of the gendered ways of care, unfortunately some that may look like it is mimicking a het setup, because she will cook and she is very caring and nurturing so then there are lots of jokes about how I need a wife to take care of me. For me, it is about affirmations. There are affirmations in that of my gender as well. Meaning as my gender, as someone who is maybe more along the masculine spectrum, having a wife is one of those things and then role-playing around that masculinity a little bit."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

An engagement with labels did not come easily to participants as the already existing labels of marriage and husband-wife did not adequately capture their experiences. Some did not know queer labels existed while others relied on queer labels to foreground their non-heterosexual realities. Some were averse to using normative labels because of former coercive engagements with it while some participants used normative labels but built their own meanings into it. A replication of dominant terms and its meanings was not seen in this study.

Meet the Parents

Meet the parents is an important milestone in the lives of cis-het couples, especially in India. Marriages are often arranged by family elders or the stamp of approval from family members is usually available to cis-het couples. When intimacies breach caste-class categories, violence from families, to the extent of 'honor killings' is known. Hence, endorsement of intimacies from family and community is considered quite crucial. In such a context, how do participants then negotiate their 'stigmatised intimacies' with parents?

Participants in this study shared that only too often 'introducing one's partner to parents' is simply not a possibility. Sometimes, queer people may not be out to their parents about their sexuality and therefore by extension sharing their reality of being a couple is completely out of question. Arti is in a heterosexual marriage and so her parents assume her to be heterosexual. Her queer reality is invisible to them. Sometimes a couple may be living together but parents may not know that they are partners.

SC shares,

> *"My family knows her and that I live with her. They have met her. They have interacted with her. They have come and lived and we have gone to meet them but they don't know about the relationship. They know us as two people living together. My parents don't [know my sexuality] and they would create a drama if they knew."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

Sometimes, even though participants are not necessarily trying to hide their relationship, their family members are not able to pick up on the signs. Even after twenty-eight years of being together, Neel's parents don't know about her sexuality or her relationship with Sap,

> *"Neel's parents don't know about us being in a relationship. They still think we are just friends. And we know them, they will not take it positively. We laugh, "How come they don't know even after so many years? Kya log hai! [what kind of people are they]"* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Some participants were out to their parents as queer. But it emerged that while the family may know about their child's sexuality and even accept their queer child, the child's couple relationship was often not known. Queer sexuality is itself so stigmatised that revealing that one is *"in a queer relationship"* becomes that much harder. In some cases, families knew about the couple but continued to ignore this fact. Namrata shares *"my mom knew but with her it was like, "Don't ask, don't tell."*

How are queer intimacies impacted by the absence of parental acknowledgement and approval? All participants shared that they did not seek parental *"permission"* for their intimacies. Not introducing the partner or not taking her to 'meet the parents' was not considered as a lack of commitment by the queer couple. Lack of acceptance from parents was not an impediment to building intimacy in the couplehood. Again, this took time and effort. The loss of parental presence for their intimacies was felt by participants but the need for it was met in other ways. Couples have put in extra effort to communicate togetherness and commitment to counter the erasure from parents. In Chapter Five, Tej has shared how they have created family time with their partner. Arti is aware that her sexuality and her couple relationship with a woman is erased particularly because of her heterosexual marriage. Therefore, she tries her best to counter this erasure.

When they are in the presence of her family, she makes it a point to sit next to her girlfriend, she reaches out and holds her hand or asks her if she is doing okay,

> *"There are ways in which in my house, with my people I have tried to make sure she knows that she is my significant other and nobody else. I hope that in small and big ways I have been able to tell her that she is priority and my girlfriend."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

Queer person's engagement with parents and families of origin is complex. At one level, heterosexual family rituals in themselves exclude queer people. Marriages and festivals are so bound by heterosexual scripts, they automatically keep queer people out. But queer people are also members of this family. Oswald (2001) talks about queer people being "outsiders-within." Families tend to relate to queer family members as if they are heterosexual (ibid). This adds to the feeling of being excluded. Family may not know how to include queer family members into family rituals. Family members are not able to teach their queer children ways to cope with their stigmatised or minority status unlike families from other marginalised families can. For example, a Dalit family is able to teach children early on what oppression is like in a Brahmin-dominated society. Thus, queer people are a minority within their own families (Ranade et al., 2016; Ranade, 2018). While the focus of this study was not on charting queer people's engagements with families, it is important to recognise that intimacies and families overlap unless those intimacies are queer in nature. Thus, this push and pull with family is often an ongoing journey with queer people having to learn not to seek validation for their intimacies within families. In addition, they have to look for validation and create a space for their intimacies outside traditional family sites. "Some lesbians create extended networks of friends or a "family of choice" to provide the sense of acceptance that may not always be available from their family of origin. Research about the creative ways in which lesbians construct positive and supportive social environments for themselves and their relationships would be valuable" (Peplau et al., 2002, p. 61).

Manu shared that it is not important for them anymore that partners and parents should meet. Sap shared that they came out as a couple on family WhatsApp groups five years ago but not a single person had even wished them on their anniversary in all these years. Now seeking family's validation was not important for them both.

> *"For me meeting family is not that important. Honestly, no. I would like an acknowledgement from them that we are in a relationship but meeting them doesn't make much difference to me. For intimacy between my partner and me, meeting parents is not at all necessary. It's possible the parents and me may not get along, right? And that's fine. It is not going to affect how I feel about her. Telling my family about her is more about deciding to include my family in my life a little more. So, it is coming from there (...) But if my parents don't like the person that is not necessarily a red flag."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"I and Neel, we both are not waiting or looking for any validation now. Actually, speaking we never did. If people know about us but they think our relationship is not as good as theirs it's not our issue."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

There was a time in her relationship that Bonnie used to feel that T not telling her parents about them was a sign of lack of commitment from T. And though she felt very hurt by this, she realised quickly enough that it has nothing to do with their intimacy but how T's parents would never be able to accept T's sexuality. Therefore, she says that some of these *"conditions"* cannot be laid down beforehand in queer intimacies,

> *"There are some things that we do control. For example, you can't touch me in a certain way without my consent. But conditions like parents being accepting or not being accepting are conditions you cannot control beforehand. You will have to see as it comes."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

This important indicator of parental approval for intimacies is missing for queer couples. 'Meet the Parents' is often not possible, nor are families able to demonstrate an inclusion or belongingness towards the partner of their queer child. Queer couples have learnt to push back on the devaluing they experience from family members. They put in effort to build and sustain their togetherness without parental approval or presence.

Living Together

Cohabitation is considered a next step in the trajectory of consolidating intimacies because marriage typically means that the couple lives under the same roof. When cis-het couples cannot be together the reasons are often spelled out and support is offered in the absence of the spouse. However, queer couples often do not see living together as a possibility because 1) 'unmarried daughters' continue living with parents, 2) women are

often married and living with heterosexual legal spouses, 3) some may be living independently but not be able to explain why someone else is living with them, 4) financial constraints hence moving into a home together may not be possible. There is an aspect of gender that is evident here in terms of 'unmarried daughters or married women' not allowed to live alone or with someone else other than natal and marital family. For Ananya and Sharmila as well as G and P, living together was barred by the fact that Sharmila, G and P all lived in marital homes. This invisibility of sexuality and not having the option to stay under the same roof with their romantic partner is not a result of lack of intimacy or commitment. It is more of an indication of the invisibility of the couplehood and how possibilities to share a home isn't a given. Manu shared that they hadn't even given living together a thought until their partner suggested it *"no. Not at all. I hadn't thought about it. I am usually a go with the flow kind of person. And I learn by doing. And if I do something and it doesn't feel right then I notice but otherwise I haven't forethought all this."*

Living Arrangements

Sap and Neel shared that in their relationship of twenty-eight years they had never ever lived together. Due to financial constraints and being AFAB persons, they lived with their natal families. Aisha shares how she and her partner have worked out living arrangements across two cities and often travel together to be with each other. Bonnie shared that she lives with her partner and Tej shared that their living arrangements also include chosen family members. Arti divides her time across two homes in the same city, one with her lesbian girlfriend and one with her legal spouse. Thus, there is a variety of living arrangements that participants have figured out together.

> *"So, my permanent address is in Delhi. I have work in Bombay. My partner has ensured that they have work in Delhi. I am staying in Bombay primarily but we travel back and forth and I schedule it so we travel together. So, while we live together, we also manage to live together when we travel around. We live together in Bombay. We live together in Delhi. We try to travel together when we have to go elsewhere. Again, I am not tired of seeing this person so clearly something is going right!"* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

> *"We want to. But financially it seems very difficult to manage. But may be in the future, we would definitely love to have a house of our own where we could spend the rest of our lives together."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

SC shares that after nearly three years of being in a long-distance relationship, she took up a six-month assignment in the same city as her partner in order to be around her. Manu and Laila gave living together a try for about a month despite some exhausting logistical and health issues. In the future they would want to give living together a try for a longer period.

> *"We had a long-distance relationship for about two and a half, three years. And that was really taxing on both of us in various ways. So, I took up an assignment, especially during that time, which allowed me to work away from office. And it was really useful because then I said that this gives me the chance to be with her (...) And I worked from Bombay and I stayed with her during that time at her house."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

> *"So, we did try living in together for a month. Basically, I stayed at her place. And there was the escape of my house but I didn't use it. So, every week day I went up and down for two hours each way for a month. So, I had to move my clothes and half of my field notes were at my place and clothes and other laptop and other materials were at her place, so what if I needed my field notes from an earlier date? Then what would I do? So, these were some of my concerns because my things were divided in two places with a one and half hour difference and bus timings controlled by the bus company. And whether I would be able to manage the bus journey because I sometimes get motion sick."* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

Creating Space Together

Couples did want space and privacy with each other which was often hard to find and unfortunately had an element of risk. G describes *"private means, her children and A [legal spouse] used to be sleeping inside and we used to be in the living area and lights used to be off and we used to be quite silent and quiet. Or in the kitchen."* Bonnie, who initially lived with roommates, shares *"and there was no privacy, I used to live in the hall and there were other people and we had to wait for everyone to fall asleep."* In the absence of living together, couples used other spaces to build intimacies *"in many many creative ways."* G narrates a couple of incidents of how she made it happen,

> *"My mom owned two row houses near Thane. At that time nobody used to stay there. The row houses had a garden that had been neglected. P's father had a green thumb and she also had a little bit of knowledge about plants. There had*

> *been some talk between my mother and me about reviving that garden so I saw this as a good chance! I told my mother that there is this friend I have who knows a lot about gardening and all that. So maybe I can take her there and my mom said yes. So, this was about fifteen kilometres away from where I lived and it was a proper house and no one was living there. So ostensibly we went for gardening but that was the first time we became really really intimate there. We went after the children had gone to school and came back when they returned. These are the little little things we tried. In my building, there was a couple who shifted abroad. They were very good friends of ours and they had given us a set of keys to keep the place clean. So that was another place for us. Though of course we had to go very chori chuppe [by hiding]. I had to go first, she would come later."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

Some participants shared that going on holidays was another way to find space and privacy though it was not always easy to negotiate due to family or finances. Sap shares that it was after being together for almost two decades that they could take a holiday with Neel,

> *"We were not so privileged and we lived with families in one room kitchen. In her home and in my home, all our family members would always be around. We used to often go to each other's homes and stay the night but we were never alone (...) At my place all of us managed in one small room. We had two sofa cum bed that could be connected together so that everyone had a sufficient place to sleep. So alone time, private time, we did not get. Five years back, she and me went to Igatpuri and we booked a hotel and stayed, just she and me alone. My family knew I am going only with her but her family was told that we are going with a group of friends. This was first time we spent some quality time by ourselves."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

When holidays were not possible, some participants shared that they would book a hotel room in the same city to get away from their families and be with each other. Booking hotel rooms is not considered an 'illicit' activity but seen as an intimate and private space to spend time, be sexually intimate and be around each other.

> *"We did make out a couple of times when my parents went out of town. Her house I can't go, she lives with family. But hotel rooms yaar! Hotel rooms! If there is a long weekend then make a plan and go to Lonavala or Goa. New Year's also you can tell at home that you are not coming home and book a hotel room and stay over there."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

Unlike, cis-het couples who are expected to live under the same roof after marriage, an automatic living together is often not possible for queer couples. Even though most

participants are financially independent, various circumstances such as heterosexual marriage, work demands, living with natal family or finances are a barrier to living together. In the absence of this, participants described creative ways of being together.

(Un)Doing Marriage

The script of marriage 'offers' cis-het couples: monogamy, forever together and legality. A date of marriage, understood as one's anniversary, marks the moment when cis-het intimacy gets full legal and social sanction. These aspects of marriage that are upheld and celebrated visibly, are these aspects that queer people also want? What are the meanings they make and how do they negotiate it?

Monogamy

Most participants wanted to be *"exclusive"* with their partner for as long as they were together. But it wasn't assumed that the couplehood is automatically monogamous. Couples often discussed whether their relationships would be *"open," "monogamous," "exclusive."* As seen in previous chapters, wanting to be exclusive with their partners was not seen as a replication of the marriage script. It primarily meant that the couple simply wanted to be each other because that is what they desired rather than following a rule that was socially imposed. Sap describes this as *"both of us are connected only to each other. We never felt any interest in any one else"* and Aisha adds,

> *"We are in a monogamous relationship; we intend to be in one forever. However, it is not something I have borrowed from the marriage script. I find romance in the resistance. That is what I value so it was never about let us alter this normative script. It was like let us look at the normative script, recognise it is not us and just move on. Bye!"* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Bonnie shares that she is in a polyamorous set up and it is a pragmatic decision for the following reasons,

> *"I don't think the kind of person I am; it is possible for one person to be able to fulfil all of it. Nor am I in a position to fulfil everything for anyone else so it is more pragmatic to have polyamorous set up. It is just pragmatic."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

Bonnie shares that polyamory is not easy to do. She admits that if T were to find someone, she would find it hard but would work towards accepting it *"it will take me some time to hajam karo it [to digest the news]."* Through it all, T and she have found ways to express their togetherness to each other within a polyamorous set up *"so now togetherness is woven into things that I do. And if I am having a fight with the other person and I don't want to talk, T would understand. And if after two days I am getting into depression then she will do something, not in a direct way, but in a sensitive way so that I share."*

Sometimes, even if the conversations hadn't been had very explicitly, monogamy or not was still a matter that was negotiated between partners. Manu shares *"she [Laila] would keep asking me gently if I am seeing anyone else and I would keep saying that I am not and I don't plan to."* SC shares how monogamy is understood in her relationship. Her partner is polyamorous and therefore it is understood that she may be with people other than SC. How their couplehood is defined is by the recognition that the two of them are *"together"* and *"coming back to you,"*

> *"We haven't talked about it [monogamy] but I know she is polyamorous and the fact that I am uni-amorous is great. I have not thought about anyone else. But if I start becoming polyamorous, how would it be, I am not very sure. But at this stage we have never thought, "Are we in an open or closed relationship"? Hamare liye ye tha ki [for us it means] we are together. That's it. We are together. For her also, she says, "I may go to anybody but I am coming back to you."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

It is critical to recognise here that negotiations about monogamy happen without any pre-existing script where monogamy is a given. Therefore, couples have to demonstrate through their actions, the promises they make to each other, especially in the absence of any social or legal scripts to enforce those promises.

Monogamy for Heterosexually Married AFAB persons: For participants whose partners were heterosexually married, the notion of monogamy and intimacy with their queer partner was complex. To start with, as per the rules of heterosexual marriage, this queer relationship would be considered 'cheating'. The fact that the 'wife' is not a heterosexual person but performing heterosexuality owing to societal pressure is a

distinction which is often overlooked or dismissed. Secondly, for the queer couple, their love is supreme and they are devoted to each other but sometimes the partner in the heterosexual marriage has to continue having sex with her legal spouse. This may give rise to helplessness and discomfort in both partners along with the added burden of having to 'hide' the queer relationship. Thus, couples had to undergo a lot of interpersonal meaning-making with each other to continue to feel that their couplehood was real and valid in the face of social meanings of 'cheating', of being a 'husband's wife' or having to provide 'sex in marriage' weighing heavily upon them. Arti is in a heterosexual marriage but it was very clear to her that the *"real couple"* is she and her girlfriend. In the section on Meet the Parents, it is evident how she demonstrates this to her girlfriend. G shares how she and her partner, who were both in heterosexual marriages tried to consolidate their love and togetherness,

> *"16th July was the day. That day she had said that I know we cannot get married but today is the day we can solemnise what we are and she actually took little bit of sindoor and put it on my head. She actually did that. So, after that, 16th July is very special and close to my heart, to me."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

Participants tried to push back on the burden of cheating that inadvertently falls on their shoulders because of being with a 'married woman.' Ananya shares that whether a relationship is straight or queer, it is up to each person in the relationship to figure out their meanings of commitment,

> *"Because in my head it's like the commitment is between you and me, so if you went and did something with someone else, whether that person knew or not, it is not their fault. So, I felt the same about marriage. If she is okay with whatever she is doing, she is consciously choosing, she is a grown adult, she is even older than me so then it's her thing. Then it is her lookout. I can't take care of her commitments."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Forever Together

Some participants desired to be with their partners in this relationship forever however the intention was different than what is socially expected from marriages. Participants expressed that for them being forever with their partner was because they really wanted to be with them. The intention was not longevity of the relationship due to social pressures but a genuine desire to be with the person they love.

> *"But not the old traditional ki ab shaadi ho gyi hai toh jeena marna because I do believe that I might want to be with you today but I might not be this person ten years down the line and nor would you and then it is stupid to just hang on. If you keep growing and keep identifying with the people you are growing to be then awesome! But if not then you don't stay in a relationship just because you said."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Couples had different ways of describing this forever together aspect *"growing old together," "no plans to live with anyone else ever," "no termination date," "a certain permanence," or "life-partner."* At the completion of twenty-eight years together (just one day before Sap was interviewed for the study) they said *"my relationship with Neel is the biggest and most valuable thing I have in my life."* Again, being together forever was not a matter taken for granted but discussed as terms of the relationship they were entering.

> *"It simply means I am in a relationship with this person, no other people. I don't intend to be in a relationship with any other person. With this person I do not have a termination date because I do not want a termination date. I couldn't be less romantic about it right now!"* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

In the absence of legal and social sanction that is supposed to guarantee a life-long relationship, participants again depended on interpersonal meaning-making. Meanings of forever together were made by believing that a future together was possible *"that's another way we describe this. Growing old together or having found the one or of this being it"* or wanting participation of one's partner in major life decisions.

> *"So now I would say that I am in a very stable, domestic kind of set up with T and if I have a major accident, I want T to be the person to decide whether to put me on ventilation or not. Regarding my property, which I don't have but if I inherit something from my parents and if T is alive, I want her to take decisions about what to do with them. I definitely don't want anyone to come into that domain (...) I am with T and I have no plans to live with anyone else ever."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

For some participants, this notion of forever was elusive. It was not something that participants necessarily expected even if they desired it. This points, once again, to the deprivation that queer couples function in: no legal or social sanctions, morality and control on sexuality, lack of representation and role-models in terms of couplehood,

personal struggles of gender-sexuality journey, to name a few. Therefore, possibilities of how long this relationship will last seems uncertain. Namrata shares that she did not articulate the relationship as being forever. Instead she reframed it to *"as long as it lasts" and "we will commit and let us see"*,

> *"Forever I did not think. I thought this is good thing and let us see how long it can go on. Forever I did not think, as long as it lasts (...) I would like something forever but given today's times and girls, it may or may not happen. I am leaving it open. I am not holding my breath for it (...) So you say in time we will see, we will commit and let us see."* (Namrata- she, lesbian, 32)

SC shares that having been unwillingly pushed into heterosexual marriage made her resist the idea of forever all the more,

> *"If you ask me zindagi bhar ka rishta [lifelong relationship] then I don't know. In fact, I got divorced after I met her. Not because of her, I was anyway going to divorce. That was a non-existent marriage and the divorce was to happen in any case. I remember us having these discussions about one day at a time and those were not easy discussions for either of us."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

Participants continued to put in effort to convey the aspect of forever together to one other even in the absence of any guarantees by external sources. Forever together was not intended as a matter of longevity of the relationship but expressed more as a genuine desire to be with the person they love. Some participants found this aspect elusive due to the deprivation and lack of support for queer couples.

Anniversary Day

The day of marriage legally and socially marks cis-het intimacies and is celebrated as the couple's 'marriage anniversary.' This legal marriage date is not available to queer people in India to mark as their anniversary. Many participants used the term *"anniversary"* to mark their intimacies but they mutually decided which day was their *"special day"* and why that day should be celebrated as their anniversary. Bonnie says *"the day I first met T is the day I would like to celebrate as our anniversary day."* G shares that the first time P put sindoor on her was their anniversary day, 16th July. For some couples, they did not want to decide on just one special day and celebrated different occasions that carried memories of their coming together as a couple.

Queer anniversaries did not carry the legality aspect that is available to cis-het couples. For queer couples, anniversaries or special days were about affirming their togetherness, once again in a social context that did not even accord them legal recognition. Even within legal heterosexual marriage, the social sanction of that marriage is a necessary event. "A marriage license is legally valid only if the marriage has been ritualized and witnessed (Oswald, 2001, p. 41). There is no official document or legal stamp to these anniversaries, yet participants cherished the special day/s and celebrated it in different ways. Sap and Neel have spent twenty-eight years together and they have not missed the day even a single year,

> *"We completed twenty eight years just yesterday. Every single year, every single anniversary, we have spent together. We would spend the whole day together. We would go to a restaurant and have food, we would visit some place, we would go to an art exhibition together, or a movie. Every single anniversary we spent together in all these years. Only this year we had to do it on video. Because of the lockdown. Otherwise we never missed meeting each other on our anniversary day."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

Participants in heterosexual marriages marked their anniversaries with their queer loved ones in different ways. Arti shares that whenever she is asked for her anniversary date on forms in restaurants and malls, she always puts the date she shares with her girlfriend though technically her legal marriage anniversary is another date altogether. G describes an incident where she and P gave their anniversary, 16th July, as an important date,

> *"Once we had gone for blood donation where they had said give us some dates on which we can call you to donate blood again. And at that time, we had given them our birthdate and 16th July saying that these are two very very important dates for us."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

And Bonnie jokes about not always remembering the exact date but celebrating anyway, whether together or alone,

> *"Even if we are not celebrating it together, I celebrate it separately. This year, after five years, who remembers the exact day whether it was 27th or 28th? Anyway, women's trauma is about dates thanks to our period dates so I don't blame lesbians for being bad about dates!"* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

What has been most evident in this entire section on (Un)Doing Marriage is the amount of meaning-making that couples have to do individually and interpersonally. Intimacy meanings are made by the people involved without a social script or a legal/social

institution backing these meanings up. They are held for each other, by each other in the face of contrary messages being made about their intimacies by society around them. Meanings made have to be delivered upon through actions, again often in isolation. Additionally, Kurdek (2004) points out that though legal and social barriers like divorce do not apply to queer couples, they continue to invest in sustaining their relationships "given the current lack of formal institutionalized barriers to leaving a same-sex relationship, perhaps the most remarkable finding from this project (see also Lewin, 1998; Marcus, 1998; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984) is that gay men and lesbians nonetheless build and sustain durable relationships" (p. 896). This insight is useful to take into the next section on how participants are 'doing relationships'.

'Doing' Queer Relationships

"Traditional heterosexual marriage is organized around two basic principles: a division of labor based on gender and a norm of greater male power and decision-making authority." (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2006, p. 408). Most people draw upon this heterosexual marriage script and gender roles to define their couplehood and build their intimacies. These legally and socially sanctioned ways of being together are widely available and visible in society for people to emulate. However, the same social scripts and sanctions are not available or applicable to queer people as seen in the earlier sections. A lot of nuance has emerged from participants' narratives on unlearning dominant scripts, borrowing from them, rejecting them, building new meanings into them or having altogether completely new values and ways of how to be with each other and how to do their relationships.

Unlearning Scripts/ Values

Some participants shared that they started out borrowing from the marriage script but soon figured that it did not apply to a queer couple and therefore began *"drafting a script together."* This recognition that the dominant scripts are inadequate came to participants with experience of being pushed out, being invalidated, not receiving any emotional, social or legal support. Plus, the realisation that social scripts were designed only for cis-gender and heterosexual intimacies and so their queer selves and intimacies actually

found no reflections in them *"scripts of gender don't work for us,"* or *"even if we are joking about husband-wife, neither of us is the man in the relationship and that's the point of it!"* Both Manu and Ananya have reflected on the marriage script that is *"all around us"* but realised that only some *"parts of marriage make sense"* to them as queer people.

> *"Obviously we see this marriage script all around us and both of us have been in relationships before this so we have had a chance to develop our own preferences and scripts also. For me, marriage at this point mainly just means a sort of a piece of paper and certificate and a hurdle to cross if you want to separate. I don't place much value in marriage per se. But of course, you watch all these Bollywood movies which are aiming towards marriage as the happy ending after which the movie ends!"* (Manu- they, queer, 34)

> *"I don't completely relate to the institution of marriage to the extent I feel that it is piece of paper that you sign in and sign out of which I feel is stupid. The parts of marriage that make sense to me in my head is the commitment you make to each other and by extension to their families or now let us say chosen families. So basically, your people. So, if I love you then by default, I want to take care of your people and myself also. So, for me that is that."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

What the social scripts withhold from queer people are the legal benefits that are available to cis-het people. Cis-het couples have access to a whole range of legal benefits in addition to social approval and social support. All of this is absent to queer people. Participants question why such benefits are available only within marriage and not available as *"rights"* for all people to access.

> *"But when you think of partnership you think about legal documents and medical decisions, those are things that have come about as civil rights to people who are married. Would I like to have the ability to have those documents with my partner? Yes. Marriage? What is it? This is where the practical comes in. What about those documents, who makes medical decisions for me, my personal effects, whatever property I may have? That becomes important because this is kin. And we don't have systems that validate that right now. They only come under the thappa [stamp] of marriage but the marriage part has never made sense but these things do."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Regarding gender and 'women's dependence' on cis-men, over time participants have begun to question whether they really need the presence of cis-men in their lives.

> *"The kind of company I keep is usually independent, strong, intelligent women who never needed or wanted a man to take care of them, even the cis, straight women. So, in that sense, "You need a man in your life" that just doesn't exist. Living in this society, does it matter? To an extent it does. For example, if we were renting or buying a house, they always want a male representation. That holds more weightage because it is just so highly patriarchal. So, in that sense it is easier to have a man in the house. But otherwise within relationships, we have not felt that. Because we have never felt that there is something we can't do."* (Ananya- she, lesbian, 33)

Making One's Own Scripts

As seen above, since gender and marriage scripts (heteronormative framework of relationships) was not applicable to participants, they had to figure out their own scripts for the relationship. Different ideas of what is an ideal relationship and how to make this work were negotiated. How do participants describe their scripts? What do they draw on and how do they operationalise it? Participants shared that their scripts were not based on the man-woman model of love but drew on personal values, ethics and political ideologies. These played a role in building intimacy as opposed to drawing from gender or marriage scripts. What is the *"guiding light"* for participants for their queer relationships? Queer-feminist politics or personal values of equality and fairness, one's own sense of independence, values drawn from childhood experiences, from their professional lives or previous relationships or *"concepts"* learnt as part of being queer and through other queer lives were used to define relationship scripts and guide the couple. Tej shares that feminism, the concept of chosen families and some childhood memories have become their guiding values. Arti, who is a mental health practitioner and has worked on women's rights says she draws on *"egalitarian and adult ways"* of being in a relationship because of her work. SC and her partner both value their own and each other's independence and this guided them.

> *"Partly, it comes from my feminist understanding that I have learnt from feminist queers around me, learnt from the person I was previously in a sexual and romantic relationship with, it comes from the concept of chosen family. That concept has a lot of resonance. Partly, some of the values remind me of things that have some intrinsic values for me because of some childhood memories of what a family should be."* (Tej- they, queer, 39)

> *"In terms of scripts, I think more than drawing on scripts of models of relationships we draw from the political ways of being with each other. So, we draw from/ on scripts of egalitarian ways of being in a relationship, more adult ways. We have both worked on women's issues, queer issues and so over time and by the time we met we had deconstructed normative relationships to a large extent, to as much as is possible."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

> *"We are both extremely independent-minded. Both of us. She made it clear from the beginning that this is not a heteronormative relationship. There is no one person who is more powerful and other person is less powerful. None of that business and I completely agreed. It was spot on for me as well. There is no man-woman here. There is no butch-femme here. Though we might be butch and femme in our own ways and we may be both at different points of time. We were very clear that we are figuring out a way. This is a relationship where we are figuring out how to be independent but at the same time have a loving relationship. This is her articulation; it is not mine. I have plagiarised."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

A feeling of trust and safety, open communication, delivering on meaning-making and taking action on promises made, have emerged as important ingredients in queer romantic relationships.

> *"One of the reasons that the relationship works is because she is extremely transparent and having been with her, I have realised…I have committed to myself that I will be as honest to her as I can be and that is what ticks between us. And we trust each other fully. We completely trust that we are together."* (SC- she, queer, 42)

Manu shares how their partner, Laila, reassured them about always being open to discuss problems even if it was as difficult as the relationship ending *"but I am not going anywhere. If there is a problem, you can talk to me about it and we will figure it out. If it means we have to separate, sure...but we can talk it out together. I am not going to disappear on you."* Bonnie shares that despite difficult times, T *"never left,"*

> *"She has always been there, she never left. She doesn't understand queerness, she doesn't understand depression, this is my reading but she never left and that means a lot."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

There is a sense of the scripts changing/ evolving with time, circumstances and one's own growth and politics. Sometimes relationship scripts may change to accommodate the personal gender-sexuality journeys of the participants and their partners. This was evident

in the last chapter in Tej and Sap's experiences. Sap adds that over time they have figured out what describes them and their relationship in affirming ways *"I would describe my relationship as a queer romantic relationship. I describe myself as an asexual queer as there is no sex involved. I don't use lesbian relationship because I don't feel like a woman. So, I don't feel comfortable with saying lesbian relationship."*

Operationalising Scripts/ Values

When the couple looks for and finds values they align on to guide their relationship, how do they operationalise it from meaning-making to organising one's daily life? Bonnie described how she started off initially wanting T and she to make meanings, looking at their relationship as a marriage. She definitely did not want the gender roles or the inequality but there was a certain meaning of love and commitment that it carried for her. However, T was not comfortable with that term at all. Over time, Bonnie and T have worked out what togetherness is for them,

> *"With T, I am in a relationship and she is my partner. We have never felt the need to define the relationship further. I am very happy with this set up (...) So now togetherness is woven into things that I do. (...) We make decisions, in different ways so we can make sure that we are physically together. Togetherness is manipulating things to make that happen. So that we can be around each other."*

Bonnie shared that it is important to her that the *"rules are equal"* and the couple discusses what the rules between them should be *"ki yeh hamara rules hoga [these are our rules]."* And while it may not always be easy to follow those rules, you learn it by *"doing it."* She started her relationship with T when she was 25 and this is what she said about her five-year long relationship with T,

> *"You do it to know it. Five years back I did not know it. I did not really have to do anything by myself. While growing up I guess mummy did everything. Then I had friends. T's rules were nobody is going to clean our kitchen or bathroom, we will do it. And I do support that political stance but I don't know how to do it, so who does the work? With depression and anxiety, I could barely get myself up and so it was very difficult for me and also earning. So, it was not fair but I just did not know. Now I do know and things are quite equal and now I am a better cook so I would like to cook more. In a kink session I can say I don't want this but in a relationship you do it as you grow in the relationship."* (Bonnie- she, kinky & queer, 30)

Since the relationship is based on values of equality and power-sharing, everyday life was organised on those values in most relationships. Daily tasks were shared. This was decided based on who could do what, what they liked to do or not and what they were good at. Sap says quite clearly that they treat each other as equals and share tasks. Aisha shares that gender is not the basis on which tasks are divided, elaborated by Kurdek (2004) "further, because gay men and lesbians cannot use the gender of the partner to fashion the content of their relationships, they must negotiate common couple-level issues such as household labor (Carrington, 1999) and family rituals (Oswald, 2002) in creative ways that do not involve gender" (p. 897). There is freedom from prescribed gender roles which is fun but it takes a lot of work and negotiations to figure it out. What is critical is that there is an *"intention"* to divide tasks up fairly.

> *"We treat each other as equals. The basic and important thing we both follow, that we are equal. There is nothing stereotypical. We both do all the housework. Whenever we get chance to stay over in each other's place we share work. My place, mostly I cook, but when there is fish, she might cook because she loves fish. Her place, she cooks and I share other work."* (Sap- they, asexual queer, 46)

> *"On one hand we are practical people and on the other hand things have just tumbled into place. There is both intention and letting things fall as it may. Scripts of gender don't work with us. That is out of the window immediately. It never works. We never started with them; it was never part of us. Gender is exciting for us because it has potential to shift around. That is fun. (...) Things are based on what we are good at. I am better at certain things and they are better at others. They are far more sensible in some aspects. I am not saying that we just do what we can and everything falls into place. Because that is not it. There are a lot of negotiations. There is caretaking. There is effort that goes into that."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Queer-feminist politics and values guide the relationship in terms of figuring out power equations between the couple as well as nurturing the relationship. For example, Aisha shares that as a couple they were both cognizant of the fact that Aisha's partner was ten years older than her and much wealthier. Any power equations that may arise because of these differences were attended to drawing on feminist politics. Arti shares that values of *"compassion and equality"* have helped nurture their couplehood.

> *"Politics is one. I have a partner who is ten years older and so much better off that I don't even understand that money. So, there are power equations there that we have worked on."* (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

> *"We were already at that place in life where we knew the norm doesn't work for us and we will have to look for alternatives and so we drew from the isms that we hold dear and we let those be the guiding light for our relationship. We just let these values show the way. And values of compassion, equality, affirmations, values of letting the other person be, providing a holding space, attending to each other's emotions. These were some of the things we aspired to in relationships and we let those things guide us rather than scripts of how to do relationships."* (Arti- she, lesbian, 35)

In the context of intimacies of queer persons assigned gender female at birth, we must recognise that there is the absence of the cis-het man and gender inequality via the institution of marriage. Power and equality between the queer couple are understood and handled very differently from the social scripts where inequality is built into how the norms are arranged. An egalitarian and negotiated manner of organising one's relationship is in line with several studies from the Global North (Kurdek, 2005; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2006; Green, 2010). Arti shares that an *"uncritical transplanting"* of social scripts onto queer intimacies would be damaging.

This section on 'Doing' Queer Relationships throws light on the journey that queer people take to figure out 1) how to be with each other and 2) what to use to guide them in being with each other. They first have to unlearn the dominant scripts that are damaging and violent towards them. They then have to search for what values can guide them in the absence of dominant scripts. These values have to be negotiated and aligned with one's partner so that they can become the guiding light for the couple. Then these values have to be operationalised in one's daily life. What keeps couples together is not any norm but the meanings they painstakingly make with each other. These meanings come from their feelings and their values. It is important to recognise that all of it takes time, years even and it takes hard work. It takes a lot of trust and belief in each other and the couplehood. Participants' stories reflect their struggles and celebrations at holding each other to make relationships work and to keep reworking them. There are some powerful lessons in *"how to be together"* that participants have demonstrated through their values and their actions.

Navigating Endings

Reasons for why couples may end a relationship have been discussed in Chapter Five. Here I would like to throw light on how endings are navigated differently from the expected norm. Divorce and legal separation are available to cis-het couples to end their intimacies. Some studies have shown that legal and social pressure has been a barrier to cis-het couples separating and the same did not apply to queer couples (Kurdek, 2004; Peplau et al., 2006). The popular cliche of cis-het separations has been one of acrimonious endings and long legal battles. Queer participants describe their separations and endings in very different ways. "Likewise, it is not uncommon for lesbian partners to want to retain their friendship well after they have dissolved their "official" couple status. These particular friendship dynamics appear to be less prevalent for heterosexual couples" (Felicia & Sutherland, 2001, p.369).

Equations with Exes

Ending romantic relationships is not always considered as the end of the association with that person or the ending of feelings for that person. For G, her relationship with P ended after about three to four years. The physical intimacy was stopped completely by her partner when their relationship was accidentally found out by her partner's legal spouse. This abrupt end did not lead to their feelings ending though P stopped demonstrating any of romantic intimacy. G and P continue to be in each other's life, their families and children continue to be friends. They still celebrate some occasions such as birthdays together though their anniversary is celebrated by G alone, in her own special way,

> *"I started telling myself that it is an important date for me, not for her, it is important for me so I will celebrate it in my own way for myself. I don't want that day to be sullied by something like this. So now how I celebrate: I acknowledge to myself the day. I treat myself to something. But I don't message her."*

P is aware that G is still very much in love with her though five years have gone by since they stopped their romantic relationship. G is upfront about her feelings for P and P is accepting of them though she does not reciprocate through any romantic gestures, any more,

> *"I have told her that don't expect me to stop acknowledging what I feel. You don't want to, that's okay. Don't expect the same from me. I will never harm you. I am not going to be a stalker. This is an expression of what I feel."*

They are still very much in touch and whenever P gets in touch to meet up or go for a walk, G always makes the time for her. G continues to feel connected to P and does not expect any reciprocation to her *"ek tarfa pyaar"* [unrequited love] towards P. However, P has her own ways of conveying an intimacy between them. For example, she gets jealous and possessive if anyone shows a romantic interest in G. And they still celebrate every birthday together.

> *"In between she was dealing with her own insecurities and moods. As she is getting over that she is able to engage again with me. But despite all that good morning, good night [messages sent to each other] happens. Unfailingly from my end at least it happens. Because withdrawal happens from her end. And she won't answer. I know her pattern also. On WhatsApp it will be from no blue ticks, to blue ticks, to blue ticks but no answer, to Gd Mrg, to Good Morning. Then she will move on to Good Morning and a flower. Then a leaf. So, this is how it is. This is another face of intimacy. Our narrow understanding of what intimacies are, it doesn't capture all this."* (G- she, bisexual, 47)

The romantic and sexual aspects of the relationship were brought to a halt by P. However, acknowledgement of feelings and a continuing presence in each other's life are signs of an intimacy that queer exes may continue to share. In addition to this, G's story points to some very important things.

Consent and power: From a normative lens, continuing to express love when a relationship has ended is often non-consensual. It is a popular trope about the spurned male lover exacting revenge on the woman he claims to love. This trope is embedded in the gender inequalities of our social system where the woman is the object of someone's desire and hence 'pursued' by the man who invariably has much more systemic privilege and power. It is important to recognise that relationships between queer persons assigned female at birth, this systemic gender power does not exist. Therefore, the potential for intimidation, threat and violence that is inbuilt within cis-het relationships simply does not translate or exist in the same way. The societal power that comes with being a cis-heterosexual man is not what any queer AFAB person has. This greatly diminishes the chances that expressions of love that appear one-sided are non-consensual.

In G and P's story, G's continued expression of love, long after the relationship is over, is negotiated in a consensual manner. AFAB persons are only too familiar with the fear and lack of feeling safe in a gendered world. G goes to great lengths to ensure that she does not talk about her relationship with P in any spaces that might even remotely give away P's identity. And she is willing to do that at the cost of never being able to talk about her love for P, who she holds so dear *"I have to be careful because she doesn't speak about me. So, I have to keep it a secret for her sake."* Therefore, to view G and P's expressions of intimacy as problematic may be coming from a cis-het gaze of attaching a man-woman model to a queer couple. It also assumes that the person at the receiving end of seemingly problematic behaviour has no agency to give consent simply because she is a woman. This is not to say that interpersonal violence in queer intimate relationships is not a reality (Sanger & Lynch, 2017). However, this example is not an instance of violence and should not be read as one. Any study/work exploring interpersonal violence in queer couples must take into account these crucial distinctions. How violence is understood and assessed has to be vastly different and has to account for the absence of power of the cis-heterosexual man and the inequality of the marriage institution (Ranade, Chakravarty, Nair, & Shringarpure, 2020).

Negotiating with legal spouses: It would be important to recognise that given the hold of heterosexual marriage on people's lives and stigma attached to queerness, when queer relationships are 'found out', possibilities of violence from the 'husband' could arise. How AFAB persons negotiate this, how do they keep themselves safe, what do they give up in order to be okay are questions that need to be explored. The focus of this study was on queer love and intimacies. However, given the complex nature of relationships and sexualities due to (often enforced) heterosexual marriage, narratives of participants indicate a huge amount of negotiations with structural scripts of cis-het maleness, marriage, children and families in their search for their authentic selves. In Ananya and Sharmila's story, their relationship ended because of Sharmila's marital reality. On the other hand, both G and Arti seem to have reached an amicable understanding with their legal spouses about their sexuality. It is not clear what negotiations P made with her legal

spouse but she had to put an end to her physical intimacies with G. Moreover, the two families continue to be friends even after the knowledge of G and P's relationship with each other became known. These negotiations do warrant explorations, especially from the point of view of the queer AFAB person, in how these negotiations regarding queerness and queer intimacies were pulled off in the context of heteronormative frameworks of power and inequality.

Invisibility of loss and pain: The other aspect of G's story is about how the overwhelming loss she experiences after her relationship with P ended, has no visibility in her immediate social circles (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2013). Her family is not aware of her grief or her continuing love for P. G's daughter now knows but otherwise any support that G has lies outside of her marital and natal family, in queer spaces.

Possibilities of love: In the way that intimacies are arranged, what are the possibilities of queer love for G? G is so clear that she is bisexual, she is so clear that she in love with P. G is in touch with the queer community but what can she tell herself about possibilities of a future with a woman when she is 47 and in a heterosexual marriage? While it may seem that G's situation is particularly hard because of her age and marital situation, this is a common experience for many queer people across all ages. Representation and role models on how to *"do queer love"* is so absent that imagining possibilities of love and living with the one they love, is often non-existent for queer people (Ranade, Chakravarty, Nair, & Shringarpure, 2020).

Other participants had some more experiences to add about their equations with their exes. Some were on good terms with exes, some are even close friends. In some cases, participants' current partners are friends with their own or each other's exes. "In a recent study (Harkless & Fowers 2005), lesbians and gay men were more likely than were heterosexuals to agree, "When a relationship is ending, one of my biggest fears is that I will lose the friendship" or that it is important "to remain friends with someone with whom I've had a serious relationship" (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007, p. 408). This continued association, closeness and even dependence on exes is often because of a lack of support systems from traditional sites like family. Exes may be their only confidant, or

one amongst very few people, that participants can be their real selves with. Additionally, the queer community is a small and overlapping one. This forces queer people to reckon with the likelihood of meeting exes at community events and often over time a more amicable equation is formed with them. A quote from Tej, throws light on how equations with exes opens up beautiful possibilities,

> *"Ex is such a bizarre word to use for this person who is clearly my family and I cannot live without. I guess it is because the cis-hets have that much control over language. I mean, why do you need to lose a person? Dynamics, interpersonally, may change, and I have never stopped loving this person so why would I lose her? (...) My partner also affirms this person's presence in my life. She also thinks that it is important for her to be in my life and for her to be in my own partner's life. I think it is a beautiful thing*." (Tej- they, queer, 39)

Chosen Families

As seen in the quote above, ending of romantic relationships led to newer ways of connecting and being with each other. Newer meanings around how to be in each other's lives are negotiated. Some popular terms for these 'intimate units' are: intentional families, families of choice (Peplau et al., 2002) or chosen families. Aisha calls it the *"family unit of happy, queer people "we have a house with one other person and her partner staying in Bombay. So, it is a family unit of happy, queer people. It is very much a family, chosen family. So, we have this little pocket of queer nirvana."*

Aisha goes on to detail a whole new set of equations that involve engaging with pets as they are part of the *"familial setup."* She adds that some of the animals were in her partner's life before she met them. Additionally, her partner co-parents the animals with someone else. Aisha put in effort to understand those dynamics and recognise that caring for animals is a family matter rather than a couple-thing,

> *"They [animals] are all part of family, some more than others depending on the relationships that have been built. Earning trust in those situations is very important because the critters are family too. So, for me it was learning to engage with that aspect of family. Learning trust, body language, learning how to engage. Watching the critters watch you create a familial role and how that also shifts power right? Just being able to see that and value that as very much a part of what a familial setup is here. (...) When it comes to the critters there is a familial thing that involves a co-parent. Of course, within the partnership there are negotiations about the critter care. I don't draw very rigid lines about partner-partner will do partner-partner things. So, the cat I brought home, I keep saying*

my cat, my cat and I am the cat's mother but I have never seen that as a: me, my partner and my cat." (Aisha- she, queer, 29)

Aisha's narrative is more evidence that meanings on intimacies, relationships, care and togetherness are made from queer people's feelings and the values that are personal to them. They are carefully put together and held by each person involved in that equation. There is a need to recognise here that these meanings are not supplied by social scripts and there is no social support for them. To build these intimacies, sustain them and keep reworking them takes hard work, imagination, creativity, time, struggle and celebration.

There is a certain trajectory and milestones for cis-het intimacies. These are withheld, absent or inapplicable to queer intimacies. This chapter describes queer experiences of some the common cis-het milestones, namely, labelling relationships, endorsement by family and living together. The chapter looks at how queer people engage with the particular values that marriage offers, namely, monogamy, forever together and legality, celebrated through anniversaries. It then details out how queer couples do relationships. Thus, dominant norms are examined through queer experiences in this chapter.

Queer people may not always have labels to describe their love. Labels were rarely borrowed from the marriage script. If certain normative terms were used, new meanings were built into them. Labels were also negotiated to uphold the gender-sexuality experiences of the persons involved. Despite the marriage script being all around, participants recognise how it does not apply to them. Some have borrowed parts of the marriage script; others have built their own scripts to guide their relationships. The guiding light of how to be together was drawn on personal values/ politics and experiences from childhood, previous relationships, professional spaces or queer community. In the absence of male gender power, queer persons assigned female at birth negotiated interpersonal power using more egalitarian values. Introducing queer romantic partners to parents and family was almost impossible. Living together was not a given. Participants did not perceive these as a lack of commitment or investment in the relationship. Participants shared that not being out to family as a couple has not been a stumbling block in building and consolidating intimacies. Participants did not expect

validation of their couplehood from parents. Assigned gender again played a role in not being able to live together. 'Unmarried daughters or married women' were not allowed to live with their romantic partner. Participants had to get creative about how they could maximise time and privacy with each other in the absence of possibilities to live together. The ending of romantic relationships did not necessarily mean an end of intimacies between queer people. Bonds with their exes and the creation of chosen families has emerged from participants' narratives. Though queer intimacies are built and consolidated in the absence of socially-approved milestones, there is no indication of a lessening of intimacies when these milestones are not met. In fact, the same milestones do not even seem to apply.

This chapter brings to light how queer intimacies navigate social norms on an everyday basis by borrowing from, rejecting and subverting the same norms that marginalise them (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2011). More often than not, oppression has brought forth new ways of being and doing (Pfeffer, 2012). The interpersonal nature of negotiations and meaning-making, without the backing of any social scripts and structures is evident. These 'departures from the norms' opens up newer ways of doing intimacies and relationships (Hammock et al., 2018, p. 2).

Chapter 7: Articulating Intimacies from the Margins

"Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge. They are chaotic, sometimes painful, sometimes contradictory, but they come from deep within us. And we must key into those feelings and begin to extrapolate from them, examine them for new ways of understanding our experiences."

- Audre Lorde, in a 1982 interview with Claudia Tate[13]

This concluding chapter discusses findings of the research study and elaborates how intimacies from the margins can inform academic work. The findings reveal that queer articulations of intimacy are rich with new ways of doing and being. These articulations are theorised in the chapter. Key reflections, analytical tools, implications on mental health work, research and curriculum development are discussed. Direction for further research work is included. The final section is a reflection of what the research process has been like for me.

The attempt of this study was to create knowledge from the margins of queerness, in the hope that the knowledge gap regarding queer intimacies can somewhat be addressed. The aim of this study was to capture and visibilise the meanings and expressions of intimacy within romantic relationships of queer persons assigned gender female at birth (AFAB). The study also aimed to generate knowledge about lives on the margins with regard to navigating queer intimacies within a hierarchical social system of gender-sexuality. My own locations- personal, professional and political are present throughout the study. Hence, this is a qualitative, phenomenological study, employing a queer-feminist standpoint epistemology and a power-marginalization lens to explore queer intimacies.

[13] Hall, J. W. (2004). *Conversations with Audre Lorde (Literary Conversations Series)*. Mississippi, USA: University Press of Mississippi.

Key Reflections

Dialectics of Queer Intimacies

Participants have described intimacy in their romantic relationships as intense and loving. Feelings of warmth and closeness have been described. Crucial differences from the normative lie in how meanings are made of these descriptions, how they are expressed in queer ways and how they are navigated in a heterosexual world. The descriptions and experiences bring out nuance and complexity. There is an experience of freedom from norms while being weighed down by them. There is a search to feel real and authentic in the face of constant invisibility and erasure. There is so much intensity on finding a queer loved one yet many challenges in being able to be together. The participants have narrated in empowering ways how they negotiate several disempowering experiences. There is love and loss, agency and helplessness. Contradictions are simultaneously present and simultaneously navigated to achieve fulfilling intimacies. It is critical to recognise the dialectics of queer intimacies, especially because of an interaction of the deeply personal with the oppressive social. "A dialectic, according to Riegel (1976), reveals underlying tensions, apparent ambiguities, and contextual choices that cannot be reduced to dualities" (Blume & Blume, 2003, p. 790). Queer persons find themselves on the margins while continuing to live in a society that heavily conditions them to be heterosexual. So, the paradoxes in living one's life are embedded in their articulations.

Romantic Relationships as Affirming Spaces

Queer romantic relationships have provided the space to experience oneself authentically, to see one's meanings and realities mirrored in another. A feeling of being valued for their queer selves and feeling safe to express their real selves in romantic relationships has added to the intensity of togetherness. This underscores how much self-censoring queer people constantly undertake and how little their experiences find representation, resonance or reflection in a largely cis-het world. Self-disclosure in relationships carries the additional content of sharing matters related to gender and sexuality. For many participants, they have lived for several years experiencing erasure and misrepresentation about identities that are core to their being. Thus, when they find partners who value

them for who they are, it is deeply affirming. The labour of each person in the dyad that goes into making their romantic relationship a space of goodness cannot be underestimated. Most queer people internalise the shame that comes from not fitting in and it takes years to unlearn that shame and value oneself. To then offer that same value to each other in a romantic setting is crucial queer labour that needs to be acknowledged.

Queer Politics and/or Community as Resource

Intimacy as a space has mainly emerged due to participants' queerness being stigmatised in spaces that they commonly occupy. Thus, queer-feminist politics and/or solidarity with queer community where they can be their real selves and make sense of their oppression is considered a key space for intimacy. This intimate space is outside of their romantic relationships but extremely important to them as queer people. Similarly, continued equations with exes and creation of chosen families points to dependence and strength found with other queer people instead of heterosexual peers or family. Interactions with queer people has played a pivotal role in the personal meaning-making around one's queerness and queer intimacies. Again, the aspect of mirroring is present here. What a queer space offers queer people is the opportunity to access stories, lives, role-models and ways of being queer. Thus, queer community in all its diversity and complexity must be understood as a huge resource in a queer person's life.

Stages for Queer Romantic Relationships

Typically, stages of relationships are used to explore progression of a relationship. For queer romantic relationships, exploring intimacies in stages helped highlight unique struggles. At every juncture there are struggles with social norms that impact how intimacies are sought, built, held. In each stage, the emotional experience of intimacy and the social impact of oppression are in constant engagement with each other, in different ways. Participants' lived realities throw light on several layers of meaning-making at the individual, interpersonal and social levels at each stage.

Queer Meaning-making

Individual and interpersonal meaning-making has been the foundation of how relationships are done as opposed to following available social scripts. Again, it is important to recognise the labour and trust that goes into believing what you are creating together. There are no outside forces that keep queer people together but their own commitment to each other. They have learnt to make and hold every meaning for each other without social approval and legal sanction, sometimes without even a single person outside the couple unit being aware. Values such as respect, consent, equality, self-determination, independence, compassion have been aspired to and foregrounded at every point in seeking and sustaining intimacies.

Queer Intimacies as Diverse and Dynamic

Diversity in relationships is not merely limited to whether relationships are open or monogamous. Diversity is introduced into queer romantic relationships because of a number of factors: individual gender-sexuality experiences, age of people involved, coming out journeys, relationship with natal families, circumstances such as heterosexual marriages, interaction with queer community and one's own personal and political values. Diversity has been seen in ages participants met their partners, how long they have been together, the age gap between them, how many relationships participants have been in before, living arrangements, how public they are about the couplehood and how they define the terms of the relationship they are in. No two relationships even in a sample of ten seem alike. Thus, trying to find commonalities or fitting these intimacies into pre-existing scripts would end up erasing the uniqueness of each relationship.

Queerness is dynamic. Identities evolve, new meanings emerge and these are accommodated and affirmed in the couplehood. There is a sense of intimacies not being static but being experienced and exchanged in ways that uphold each person's realities. Thus, queer relationships have been alluded to as journeys or cooking *andaaz se* [without a recipe].

Queer Intimacies as Subversive

Queer participants resist and subvert the social norms and draw on personal and political values to build their couplehood together. Despite the ever-present struggles, they have experienced freedom and romance in the resistance. Pushback on the social norms have opened up newer ways to be together. The resistance to social norms is hard-fought and hard-won and requires strength, imagination and creativity. How queer intimacies are defined, expressed and navigated provide crucial counter-narratives to the dominant norms. Queer intimacies therefore have subversive power. They ask critical questions about how dominant norms of intimacy are arranged.

Theorising Intimacies from the Margins

For far too long, as literature review has also revealed, the understanding of queer relationships has been built through a heterosexual framework: man-woman, marriage, gender roles and gender inequality. However, queer persons' descriptions of their own lived realities and felt experience of intimacies are quite different. Once the norms don't fit, how participants make their journeys and do their couplehood is quite diverse, unique and complex. These articulations help create new knowledge about intimacies that are absent in the mainstream.This section has attempted to provide some concepts that can be used as analytical tools in order to build an understanding on intimacies.

Power-Marginalisation Lens

As has been evident in literature as well as the experiences of the participants, gender and sexuality is an axis of power. Heterosexual and cis-gender people benefit in a social system that is designed to fit their realities. Those who don't fit the social rules of gender-sexuality find themselves at the margins. This can be conceptualised as the power-marginalisation lens. Using this lens helps recognise the oppression that exists for queer people and their intimacies. It helps acknowledge the limitations that cis-het persons may have in fully grasping the extent of marginalisation because they live in a system that fully backs their sexuality and gender. It also helps acknowledge one's own complicity as

a cis-het person in perpetuating systemic oppression. Once these acknowledgments are made, addressing the impact of oppression is possible.

Context of Deprivation and Erasure

All queer people are marginalised on account of their non-normative sexualities and/or genders. Any work on queer intimacies that focusses on sameness and neutrality ends up disregarding the oppression that exists and is experienced on a daily basis. We must first recognise this lopsided context within which queer intimacies exist. This has been theorised as the context of deprivation and erasure (Ranade, Chakravarty, Nair, & Shringarpure, 2020). The context of deprivation and erasure includes lack of legal sanction, social approval, support networks, queer role models and benefits. It also includes experiences of discrimination, invisibility, stigma, violence and devaluing. Therefore, the context of deprivation and erasure helps us acknowledge the hierarchical nature of intimacies and the losses and marginalisation embedded in it.

Lack of Systemic Power
(in absence of Cis-het Masculinity and Institution of Marriage)

It is important to recognise that AFAB persons do not have the same systemic power that is attributed to a cis-het man by society. Additionally, they do not receive any benefits that are accorded via the institution of marriage. Therefore, any readings of man-woman interactions cannot be uncritically transplanted onto interpersonal interactions between queer AFAB persons. Behaviours that appear to replicate man-woman models are not necessarily so. And even if they might be, they simply do not accrue the same power that a cis-het couple is accrued. Thus, nuanced understandings that account for the lack of systemic power in queer relationships becomes necessary (Ranade, Chakravarty, Nair, & Shringarpure, 2020).

Valuing Queer Ways of Doing and Being

Social norms are structured such that they fall short in capturing or explaining queer realities. Any understandings of queer intimacies using a man-woman lens devalues the diversity and uniqueness of queer lives and loves. Meanings made by queer people are drawn from their feelings and their values, are held together by each person in the

equation, in the absence of any social backing or scripts. Meanings and ways of doing couplehood are varied and evolving. Any attempt to fit these meanings into cis-heterosexual frameworks would negate queer experiences. Currently, queer intimacies are considered less or lacking. Therefore, each person, especially cis-het persons need to unlearn their prejudice in order to value queer intimacies exactly how they are articulated by queer people themselves. Diversity is inherent to queerness. Differences that exist need to be upheld and not hierarchised.

Counter-narratives

The creation of knowledge carries within itself the lopsided power equations that exist in our society. Not every person's life is considered worthy of knowledge creation. Standpoint epistemology challenges this and upholds situated knowledges from the location of the oppressed. These locations help deconstruct the oppressive default as seen through the narratives of the participants. The participants have shared their intimate lives and helped create knowledge from the margins on intimacies in romantic relationships in the following ways-

- Their narratives have shed light on what actually exists but was not visible.
- They have helped reflect on why that invisibility happens.
- Their stories of engaging with social norms give new direction on what intimacies can be like not just for queer people but for everybody.

Recognising counter-narratives as valid knowledge can help make a dent in the largely unquestioned oppressive structures. There are powerful lessons to be learnt about love, intimacies and couple/family processes in the queer deconstructing of cis-het ways of doing intimacies.

To Sum Up

Engaging with articulations of intimacies from the margins would mean a recognition that-

- the context of intimacies is a social one and not a private, interpersonal one alone.
- social norms of heteronormativity and body-gender binary carry power and inequality within them.

- matters of gender and sexuality are done through social institutions such as marriage and family that automatically keep queer people out, erasing their diversity and uniqueness.

In the abstract of their article Decentering Heteronormativity: A Model for Family Studies, Oswald et al. (2005) write "the term queering processes refers to acts and ideas that resist heteronormativity by challenging the gender, sexuality, and/or family binaries described". "Utilizing this approach, we prioritize individuals' interactions and the meanings they attach to them in constituting "family" (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). As have other family scholars before us, we believe that family is best considered as something we do, rather than something we have (Daly, 2003; Oswald et al., 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987)" (Allen & Mendez, 2018, p. 71).

Thus, it would further mean a recognition that-

- values and ways of meaning-making and navigating queer intimacies is different from the rules of heterosexuality and cis-genderism.
- these values and ways need to be privileged and upheld while engaging with queer people and their intimacies.
- these newer values and ways are valid knowledges and open up possibilities for all intimacies through a celebration and valuing of difference as opposed to hierarchising them.

"Further, it pushes us to disconnect deviance from difference, to see it simply as a difference, not necessarily good or bad. From this view, we then allow for the conceptualization of non-value- laden pluralistic families and processes (Allen, 2001) that comprise a mix of dominant ideology, minority ideology, and agency (Jackson, 2006). In doing so, we enhance the ability to understand varied families' lived experiences based on the politics of their locations (Few, 2007)" (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2011, p. 565). Drawing on the concepts and articulations shared above, there are some implications for mental health work, research and curriculum development that are described in the next section.

Implications

Mental Health Support

Mainstream curriculum at Graduate and Post-graduate levels in any Psy discipline and mental health education currently does not teach students about queer lives and queer intimacies in affirmative ways. The curriculum is woefully lacking in authentic knowledge. It is quite pressing that the curriculum on queerness is looked at from a lens that is non-pathologising and also goes beyond. A lens from the margins of queerness will require a rethinking about the construction of normal and abnormal bodies, minds, genders and sexualities in order to provide responsive services to queer-trans people.

The mental health field can play a crucial role in engaging with queer couples to provide therapeutic support in affirming ways. Taking cognizance of one's privilege and power as the cis-het practitioner is an important first step. In addition, practitioners keen on providing support and opening up their practice to queer couples will need to acknowledge that mainstream curriculum does not incorporate or accurately represent queer intimacies. Thus, they will have to acquire additional knowledge and perspective that is generated by queer people in order to better equip themselves to respond to specific needs of queer couples. This PhD is a possible starting point as it is knowledge generated by queer people as experienced by them, about their own lives and intimacies.

Affirmative guidelines on engaging with queer couples and their intimacies need to be developed and included in curriculum and training on Couples and Family Therapy. Including queer voices and queer knowledge in framing these guidelines is a must. Guidelines need to focus on unlearning cis-het prejudice in order to learn how to value queerness and queer intimacies. Guidelines must take into account the social context and its impact on personal meaning-making for queer people and their intimacies. The dialectics that are built into the personal because of the social can play a key role in informing how queer intimacies are held and validated in a therapeutic setting. Holding space for queerness is about holding paradoxes that emerge because of being relegated to the margins.

Research on Intimacies and Intimate Relationships

Research on queer intimacy is definitely needed but what lens is used to study it would require careful thought. Any neutral approaches that undermine social inequality and oppression in the context of intimacies are likely to create knowledge that replicates biased knowledge systems. All researchers should be aware of the power they carry in their social locations and be reflexive and explicit about it in the research process. Additionally, researchers who are 'studying down' should ideally be upfront about stating their cis-het locations and share their reasons for studying oppressed locations. The understandings around queer intimacies in this study has opened up possibilities for how research around intimacy can be framed and approached. A lens from the margins is not limited to queer intimacies alone. It can be applied to all intimacies for newer understandings.

Curriculum Development on Gender-Sexuality

Messages of how to do intimacies are laden with heterosexual and man-woman ideals and are passed on through any and all curriculum on the topics of gender-sexuality. Therefore, there is an urgent need to revamp curriculum on gender-sexuality. These topics, trainings and curriculum must start by first interrogating what is considered 'normal' gender and sexuality and how that normal gets socially constructed in narrow ways of man-woman heterosexuality. The social construction of heterosexuality and the body-gender binary that perpetuates inequality and oppression on non-heterosexual and non-cis people and lives needs to be recognised. Gender-sexuality needs to be looked at through a power-marginalization lens. Examining privileges of being cis-het must be the starting point in any discussions on topics of gender-sexuality and LGBTQI+ lives.

Further Research Directions

This PhD has been more broad-based in capturing what queer intimacies in romantic relationships look like. Each separate theme of intimacy can be explored in-depth. Intimacy can be studied specific to social locations of other marginalisations of caste, religion, ability and gender using an intersectional approach. Exploring the co-creation of

intimacies by queer couples would enrich understandings on queer intimacies. Explorations from the perspective of queer AFAB persons on their negotiations regarding queer sexualities and intimacies within dominant heterosexual settings such as marriage is likely to throw up newer understandings. Intimacies of trans identified persons is another research area requiring in-depth exploration.

The PhD Journey and Me

Thinking through how knowledge claims are made and justified and the role of values and locations to guide methodologies has been an enriching experience for me. Standpoint Epistemology supported me in my attempt to foreground participants' narratives in an authentic manner and value them as valid knowledge. It allowed me to bring myself into the research process in fuller ways. It helped me maintain a writing style that had political and affective components which is in sync with how I am as a person.

To write politically about love was made easier by the participants' articulations. Their everyday life is testimony to how politics can be put into praxis. Being themselves and loving who they want to, is an act of resistance. This resistance and resilience resonated with me and helped me present queer love in all its subversive hues.

I knew the participants in different ways and parts or details of their lives. However, in the interview space, I got an opportunity to experience their lives more closely. As they took me on a journey with them, I felt their joy and pain, their strength and helplessness. I genuinely learnt so much and continue to be overwhelmed by the powerful lives that they lead.

Throughout the research process, my various locations were present, often simultaneously. The researcher in me did not need to separate the queer, the therapist or the activist in me. My identities and experiences blended in and I drew on the strength of

each location at different points in the research process. Reflexivity is a value I hold dear and I was able to operationalise it throughout the study.

This research has become a two-way process. What I used to create knowledge is now being informed by the knowledge created. The thesis has become a resource that provides me insights for my own personal, professional and political growth.

To be able to voice everything that I have been able to, has felt like an unburdening. I have carried many unsaid thoughts and ideas about queer intimacies over the years. The structure that academic work demands, made me sit with what I know and learnt from participants. This thought-through and thought-out manner of engaging with intimacies has been cathartic. The rigour and integrity that I was able to bring to the subject of queer intimacy has been rewarding.

Appendix 1

Invitation to Participate in PhD Study

Intimate relationships form an integral part of our lives. The complexities of our emotions and experiences come alive in the romantic and sexual relationships we form as adults. We live in a largely heteronormative society in which- heterosexuality is considered the only legitimate sexual orientation; man- woman are the only two visible genders; marriage and family is the only acceptable way of relating. Yet so many of us experience love and intimacy that cannot be contained within this narrow norm. Am sure we recollect the thrills of those early attractions. Despite the fear and shame that may soon follow, those initial stirrings make our hearts pound with desire. Then many of us start the journey of exploring our sexualities and we seek out others like us to share intimacies with. These journeys are what my PhD is attempting to capture- how do queers experience and express intimacies in romantic and sexual relationships? How do we celebrate love, romance and pleasure? How do we negotiate and affirm our togetherness in a society that otherwise tends to invisibilise us?

This PhD is an academic exploration into queer intimacies and I would like you to invite you to participate and enrich it with your experiences. As much as I would have loved to explore complexities and nuances of queer intimacies across multiple lived realties, there are some limitations due to time and knowledge constraints.

- This is a Bombay-based study only.
- You should have been assigned gender female at birth though your current gender identities could be different from that assignation.
- You should identify non-heterosexual (lesbian/ bisexual/ queer/any other labels that you choose for yourself).
- You must be age 21 and above.
- You should have been in an intimate relationship for at least 2 years. You need not currently be in a relationship.

I am aware that I am not including trans* identities. Lived realties across the trans spectrum require a separate exploration for which I do not believe I am prepared or whether it is my place to explore. I do have a certain familiarity with queer intimate relationships of AFABs because of my own sexuality and gender locations as a queer cis-woman, my work as a mental health practitioner and my queer feminist politics. This PhD feels like an extension of these locations and I am looking forward to learning from and capturing the diverse meanings, experiences, negotiations and expressions of what intimacies mean to you. Data collection will be through open- ended interview/s scheduled as per your convenience. An interview will last at least one hour and can be in English, Hindi and Marathi. You may find that within the safety of the interview space, you are able to share unhesitatingly, perhaps even discover, what these intimacies mean and reflect on the joys and vulnerabilities that come with it. Anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any point are guaranteed. There is a lot more I would like to share about this study especially regarding ethical considerations and informed consent. If you are interested, please do contact me via email on shruti.network@gmail.com. Please share this widely.

-Shruti
PhD scholar at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay

Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet

Title of the study:

Articulating Intimacies from the Margins: An exploratory study on intimate relationships of queer persons assigned gender female at birth/ gender queer/ non-binary gender

What is the study about?

Intimate relationships form an integral part of our lives. The complexities of our emotions and experiences come alive in the romantic and sexual relationships we form as adults. We live in a largely heteronormative society in which- heterosexuality is considered the only legitimate sexual orientation; man- woman are the only two visible genders; marriage and family is the only acceptable way of relating. Yet so many of us experience love and intimacy that cannot be contained within this narrow norm. Am sure we recollect the thrills of those early attractions. Despite the fear and shame that may soon follow, those initial stirrings make our hearts pound with desire. Then many of us start the journey of exploring our sexualities and we seek out others like us to share intimacies with. These journeys are what my PhD is attempting to capture- how do queers experience and express intimacies in romantic and sexual relationships? How do we celebrate love, romance and pleasure? How do we negotiate and affirm our togetherness in a society that otherwise tends to invisibilise us?

Shruti Chakravarty (that's me!) is a PhD scholar at Tata Institute Of Social Sciences, Mumbai Campus. This PhD is an academic exploration into queer intimacies and I would like you to invite you to participate and enrich it with your experiences.

- This is a Bombay-based study only.
- You should have been assigned gender female at birth though your current gender identities could be different from that assignation.
- You should identify non-heterosexual (lesbian/ bisexual/ queer/any other labels that

you choose for yourself).

- You must be age 21 and above.
- You should have been in an intimate relationship for at least 2 years. You need not currently be in a relationship.

Data collection will be through open- ended interview/s scheduled as per your convenience. An interview will last at least one hour and can be in English, Hindi and Marathi. Interviews will be audio recorded and transferred to my personal computer which is password protected. The audios will be transcribed and the transcription will be shared with you. Any changes you wish to make will be incorporated.

I would like to invite you to participate beyond the data collection process. All your ideas on how you would like to contribute, how to shape the study, what content to explore, inputs in analysis and how to disseminate the study after completion are welcome.

Ethical considerations:

Anonymity and confidentiality is guaranteed. No identifying details will be revealed or shared at any point. After the study is completed, audios will be deleted. The transcriptions will not contain any names, location, or any other details that could identify you. The stories and experiences of intimacies will be published and publically available. There is a possibility of further academic work based on this PhD. At no point however will any identifying details be shared or made available to any one.

There is an overlap in our lived realties because I myself identify as a queer person and we access the same queer spaces. I am open to discussing what steps I should take to make sure that you don't feel uncomfortable about this. I would like to make every possible effort to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

You have a right to withdraw from the study at any point. You have a right to change or delete any information shared at any point in the study.

Benefits and Risks:

You may find that within the safety of the interview space, you are able to share unhesitatingly, perhaps even discover, what these intimacies mean and reflect on the joys and vulnerabilities that come with it.

You will have access to the final publication.

There are no material or monetary benefits from this study. I will endeavour to keep costs at your end to a minimum.

You may revisit some painful memories and this may cause you distress. iCall telephone helpline is a free, professional and queer-affirming counselling service that you can reach out to: 022-25521111, www.icallhelpline.org

I am also listing the names of a few queer-friendly counsellors you can contact.

Aparna Joshi: [number deteted here to protect privacy] (Thane)

Amrita Joshi: [number deteted here to protect privacy] (Mulund)

SnehaJanaki Ramesh: [number deteted here to protect privacy] (Andheri)

Though, I am a mental health practitioner, my practice will unfortunately be unavailable to you in the context of this study. This is to ensure that we set some boundaries that contribute to you feeling emotionally safe.

Who to contact other than me in case of any concerns?

Dr. Shubhada Maitra- Research Guide

Professor, Centre for Health and Mental Health, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Contact info: shubhada@tiss.edu

Consent Form

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet. I have got the chance to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers received. I am aware that the interview is being audio recorded. I will be given a signed copy of this consent form. I give my consent to participating in this PhD study.

Signature:
Name: (given/ chosen/ preferred)
Date:

Signature:
Name: Shruti
Date:

Appendix 3

Interview Guide

Interview date:

Interview time:

Interview venue:

Audio label:

Demographic details:

- Name/ chosen name
- Pronoun
- Chosen gender label
- Chosen sexuality label
- Currently in a relationship- Y/N
- Age
- Religion
- Caste
- Education
- Profession
- Monthly income
- Geographical location in Bombay
- Originally from which place?
- In touch with queer community? If possible share names of groups/ events you participate in? And for how many years?

I: Interviewer

P: Participant

1. How do participants describe intimacy in general: What does intimacy mean to you?

Now, within the context of intimate relationships, can we explore what intimacy means to you? Will you share experiences from your current relationships or would you like to start somewhere else?

2. Relationship history: Where do you seek potential partners? How did you meet someone? How did you know that you were interested and whether it was being reciprocated? How did you take it forward?
3. When and how did you decide that you were in a relationship with this person?
4. Names, labels and definitions used for intimate relationships: What do you call this person? What do you call the relationship?
5. Which scripts influence participants: Do you have an ideal relationship in your mind that you would like to replicate?
6. How do participants describe their relationship script: How do you describe what you share? How do you affirm this togetherness? What negotiations or boundaries are set?
7. What living arrangements exist?
8. What expectations of intimacy do participants have from relationships? Are they being met: What do you say/do as a couple that expresses love and togetherness?
9. In which areas do participants express intimacy: Are there things you do together that makes you feel close to each other?
10. How is intimacy negotiated: What are some of things you say/do for your partner to express intimacy? How do you make her/them/ ze feel special? What do they say/do for you that makes you feel special?
11. How do you express yourselves sexually?
12. Do you have any thoughts on how cis- heterosexual relationships usually are?

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