"THIS IS THE LIFE OF *KOTIS*"

Normative Contradictions and the "Ethical Labor" of Being Queer

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Abstract

This article engages with current debates in queer anthropology that interrogate gender and sexuality as discrete analytical domains and highlight their complex entanglement in colonial and capitalist structures of power. It focuses on the epistemological and methodological challenge of studying queerness while moving beyond both identity-based approaches and definitions relying on anti-normativity. Grounded in ethnographic material from Hyderabad (South India), the article explores intrinsic contradictions of normative regimes of kinship, gender, and sexuality and how they affect queer people in specific ways. It introduces the concept of "ethical labor" as an analytical tool for describing how living with those contradictions exacts unequal costs and yields unequal rewards for different kinds of people and thus allows to specify both the difference of queerness and differences within it.

Keywords: *ethics, normativity, gender, sexuality, kinship, South India*

Amin is almost always busy, usually on some family errand. This time, I accompany him to the tailor to collect a suit for his cousin who is about to get married. He seems to be familiar to the staff, and Amin confirms that he comes here frequently, seeing that he is in charge of fashion for all his relatives. He smirks, boasting that, for him, they stitched the suit overnight—a clear, if likely exaggerated, testament to his status of cherished regular. As we are about to leave, the shopkeeper asks with a snide smile, if the suit is for Amin's wedding. Amin turns on his heel and breezes across the store, cackling indignantly:

"*Meri to nahi!*" Not mine, of course.

"I won't marry," he adds, halfway out the door, me trailing behind, as the tailor asks when it will be his turn. He seemed to add an extra bounce to his gait, an even more vigorous than usual swing to the hip, a distinctly exuberant wave of the wrist, as if to lend insistence to his dismissal of the question and, maybe, to defy its veiled taunt. As we step onto the crowded road outside, in the heart of Hyderabad's Old City, Amin looks unfazed. Nonetheless, I cannot shake the feeling that the man's question was more than a guileless inquiry, and that Amin's demeanor and buoyant exit from the shop—and from the incipient interaction—was a tad too chipper, a bit too gay. I wonder how he feels about it.

Amin is in his mid-thirties. For anyone that age in India, social pressure and scrutiny to get married is constant, but it might feel differently oppressive for different people. Amin's gender performance is not normatively masculine—some would call it 'effeminate'—and he "is known" to sleep with men. After all, people talk; not openly, maybe, but the Old City is

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in some respects its own microcosm where secrets are difficult to keep, especially in the tightly knit, because doubly minoritized religious community of Twelver-Shi'is to which Amin belongs.

I wonder how Amin feels about it, but I do not want to ask. Instead, I tell him about an incident a few days ago, when I was invited to a family gathering of a close friend and found myself in an inquiry—and then argument—about my marital status. I was accused of being selfish while my feminist critique of marriage was infantilized as a refusal of responsibility. I felt deeply frustrated for being unable to "properly" retort, as I was not about to stage a coming out scene at my friend's house by detailing my long-term relationship with a same-sex partner or other forms of mutual responsibility I consider part of practices of queer kinship. I also felt disappointed that my friend, who knows me well, kept quiet. Mostly, I felt angry. By the time I finish the story, we are seated on Amin's scooter, dashing nimbly and recklessly through the chaotic traffic of the ever-congested Old City. Amin shakes his head, exasperated:

"These assholes!" he screams at no one and everyone. "What do they care? Is it their business? All these questions; they should just shut up!"

He starts flipping off wildly in all directions and, swooshing through a bustling alley, we both burst into laughter—the laughter perhaps a tad too manic, a bit too gay.

Queer Beyond Sexuality and Non-Normativity

Is Amin queer?

The aim of this article is to reflect on what is at stake, epistemologically, in asking that question. The answer is a simple no, if "queer" means an explicit sexual or gender identity. In my presence, Amin has used different words to talk about himself (on which more below) but "queer" is not one of them. However, the answer presents a considerable epistemological and methodological challenge, if "queer" refers to the destabilization of monolithic, coherent, or legible identities or of the very categories of gender and sexuality as cross-culturally applicable analytical domains (Arondekar 2023). Ongoing debates about the (im)proper objects and subjects of Queer Studies "center analyses of how power moves through sex, gender, and sexuality as contingent historical, political, and embodied cultural formations, shaped and reshaped by colonialism, capitalism, and globalization" (Weiss 2024, 5). This is arguably the dominant academic understanding of queer, which entails attention to how gender and sexuality are enmeshed with other vectors of social difference like race, class, or nationality (Eng and Puar 2020; Jaleel and Savcı 2024).

Rethinking "queer" from transnational and postcolonial perspectives has not only entailed the "decentering" of sexuality "as a distinct domain of being and experience" (Meiu 2023, 12) but also the reexamination of its relation to normativity (Wiegman and Wilson 2015). Anthropologists have documented how queerness can be internal to various normativities underlying social life, rather than being necessarily "outside," "excluded from," "against," or "beyond" them. Queerness emerges here as a specific capacity of inhabiting, sustaining, deploying, or even stimulating normativity as something fragile, unstable, reversible, open-ended, or contradictory—in other words: as something that is at least potentially always already queer itself (Hendriks 2023).

From this perspective, Amin *is* queer; but so is, at least potentially, anyone. If queerness runs through the constitutive normative fabric of social life, what differentiates Amin's life from, say, his soon-to-be married cousin or any straight single person his age cannot then be readily specified. To suggest, however, that his erotic desires, sexual practices, intimate life, and embodied gender as well as all the experiences that come with them—the abuse, the insults, the taunts, the micro-aggressions just as much as the pleasures, the joy, the unique capacities for love and relationality—make no difference would be, surely, senseless. Margot Weiss describes this as the unresolvable but productive tension that animates Queer Anthropology: the tension between an abstracted queer, "unmoored from gender/sexuality" (Weiss 2022, 329), and a persistent return to matters of same-sex desire and gender dissidence. My aim in this article is to explore this tension ethnographically, namely as a form of what I call "ethical labor."

An apt starting point for unpacking what I mean by ethical labor is Vaibhav Saria's (Saria 2021) ethnography of *hijras* in rural Odisha. While *hijras*—a term for a range of South Asian trans-feminine embodiments—seem by default excluded from kinship arrangements based on reproductive heterosexuality, Saria shows that the continuation of those arrangements is dependent on unique forms of economic, social, emotional, and sexual work performed by *hijras*. Cis-heteronormative social formations are constantly threatened to be undone by their own intrinsic contradictions, for example, by inevitable fraternal antagonism in patrilineal inheritance regimes or by irresolvable conflict between affinal and consanguineous loyalties. *Hijras* alleviate, contain, or absorb those contradictions by mobilizing, among other things, Hindu and Islamic notions of asceticism, which are deeply rooted in South Asian cultural history, and which allow *hijras* to be neither fully inside nor fully outside the cis-heteronormative social fabric—what Saria calls being "beside" or "in diagonal relation" (Saria 2021, 56). Saria stresses that *hijras* face violence and marginalization not because they fail to conform to the norm but because violence is encoded in the norm itself.

I propose the concept of "ethical labor" to draw attention to the crucial fact that the norm may be violent for anyone, *though not for everyone in the same way or in equal measure*. This inequality entails different forms of ethical labor for different kinds of people, and it is central to what it means to be queer, in terms of both the difference of queerness and differences within it.

"This is the Life of *Kotis*!"

One evening, Amin invited me to join him for visiting his friend Davinder. Davinder lives with his mother in a middle-class neighborhood around 30 minutes from the Old City. We were welcomed warmly by our hosts, the atmosphere jolly and upbeat, as the four of us settled down over tea and biscuits. The ensuing conversation was lively and humorous and was carried mainly by Amin and Davinder's hilarious banter, ripe with sexual innuendo, queer-coded jokes, and salacious gossip, which continuously skirted and more than once crossed the bounds of polite parlor talk. Amin calls Davinder "*aapa*," elder sister, who refers to Amin as "sweety," and while both present as male, they often use female pronouns and verbal endings for themselves when speaking to each other in both Hindi and English.

After Davinder's mom had excused herself and gone to bed, they tried to teach me "dirty" words in Hindi. They were delighted that I already knew some, including "*koti*" and "*panti*." These terms refer to sexual roles in male same-sex relationships, the former designating a passive, feminized partner, the latter their active counterpart. The meaning of these terms is unstable and their genealogy contested, especially because *koti* has gained wider prominence only in the 1990s, mainly as an epidemiological category in the context of HIV/Aids prevention (Cohen 2005; Boyce 2007). In current practical use, *koti* tends to indicate a distinct erotic subjectivity, conflating homosexuality, effeminacy, and lower-class/caste status, while *pantis* are usually considered "normal" men due to their penetrative sexual role and normatively masculine gender performance. Davinder explained that they were both *kotis* but grinned mischievously, adding that Amin was more of a "manly *koti*." Although Amin's outrage was mostly feigned, he did appear piqued, as we launched into a lengthy discussion on sexual preferences and practices, especially versatility, which revealed *kotis* and *pantis* to be ideal types rather than reality. Eventually, Davinder conceded he only meant that Amin does more "manly work," outside the house, like managing properties of his family, talking to contractors and construction workers and such.

In fact, matters of work turned up again and again in our conversation. Since I was surprised about how "unguarded" they had been in front of Davinder's mother, I mentioned how lovely it was that she seemed so accepting. Davinder smiled at me indulgingly. A sullen mood descended onto the room, as he explained that she knew he slept with men but did not know that he "actually loved them." His mother had accepted that he would not marry, he claimed, but she took "revenge" (*badlā*) on him: Revenge for his father who had left, for his brother who had moved to the USA, for her family and in-laws who had abandoned her after her divorce. Now, only Davinder remained, and he felt stuck, confined to their apartment and the daily chores of running the household while caring for his ageing mother. This is something he shares with Amin, whose father had died when he was young and most of whose siblings and cousins had either left the country or were married. They were busy with their own lives and families, so it fell to Amin to be caretaker of his mother and ailing grandparents and executive assistant, of sorts, for the extended family. In turn, they supported him financially and even discouraged him from pursuing a "real" job—until he got married, that is.

Amin and Davinder explained that because they were *kotis*, they had to be son and daughter at the same time, which means doing the gendered work expected of sons and daughters. This was mirrored by their love lives. Especially Davinder stressed that his ideal relationship was to take care of a man, to the point where his partner would be utterly dependent on him, where he couldn't even lift a spoon without him. But this would never happen. Their lovers came and went and, ultimately, they would always go back to their wives. Having his sexual needs met was easy, Amin added, but he was looking for a *partner* and that, by contrast, was out of reach. Even though *kotis* were more devoted caretakers and more skilled lovers, in the end, they can't be wedded and bear children and would, therefore, end up alone. After all, they were neither "*hijras*" nor "Bangalore gays."

"*This* is our life," Amin concluded. "*This* is the life of *kotis*."

The "Ethical Labor" of Queerness

What, exactly, does "this" indicate? Besides defining the life of *kotis* in contradistinction to *hijras* and "Bangalore gays," to which I return below, Amin and Davinder portrayed it primarily as geared to sustaining the life of their families and lovers in ways that not only reproduced but also celebrated hegemonic kinship, gender, and domestic ideals. Their moral personhood—what makes them good people, what makes them both loving and deserving of love—is based on embodying ideals of femininity as self-denial and unconditional, nonreciprocal care work within a larger patriarchal sexual economy. This ranges from classic domestic labor to everyday chores, like handling tenants or having wedding suits stitched last minute so that relatives can get married in time and style. While they excel in that role, claiming to be even more devoted caretakers than cis women, they also make for more skilled lovers. Unlike cis women, they are not bound to the desexualization and demands of chastity that accompany respectable femininity, epitomizing instead masculine ideals of sexual vigor and prowess.

And yet, there is also palpable despondency and resentment in that portrayal. It contains an incisive moral critique of the contradictions of those ideals and of how their costs percolate toward queer subjects. This emerges most pithily in Davinder's account of his mother's "revenge." She suffers from the cruelty of a patriarchal kinship system that abjects widows and divorcées, yet her revenge lands on Davinder precisely for *failing to reproduce* a crucial element of that system: marriage. At a superficial level, revenge can latch onto him simply because he remains; not being married himself, he has neither reason nor moral justification to leave. While Davinder may experience revenge as issuing from his mother, it resides, at a deeper structural level, in the life of *kotis* itself.

They cannot bear children like women and although, like men, they could marry and beget them—as some *kotis* indeed do (Ghosh 2022)—Davinder and Amin do not want that. Hence, they would end up alone, which means they remain lovers to be abandoned in infantilized adulthood in their parent's households: always son *and* daughter, never father/husband or mother/wife. *Kotis* epitomize contradictions of idealized cis-heteropatriarchal gender and kinship arrangements, insofar as they simultaneously *excel and fail* in them and do so in specific ways that, according to Amin, distinguish them from *hijras* and Bangalore gays.

These distinctions indicate not only differences in terms of gender and sexual "identities," but also in how those are shaped in fundamental ways by class, caste, and religion.[1] *Hijra* evokes a supposedly more consistent trans-gender identification as well as notions of poverty or of the *gharana*, an alternative kinship system prevalent in urban contexts (Reddy 2005). "Bangalore gays," by contrast, is a term Amin uses to describe not only gender-normative but also class- and caste-privileged men associated with cosmopolitan discourses of discrete, politicized LGBTQ+ identities and with metropolitan activist communities or "chosen families." Both are furthermore deeply informed by politics of caste and religious communalism in the broader context of an increasingly powerful Hindu nationalism (e. g., Dutta 2012;

[1] The scope of this article does not allow for a detailed analysis of how Amin's gender and sexuality is shaped by his complex intersectional positionality of relatively high social status and upper-class position in an overall economically and politically severely marginalized religious minority.

Upadhyay 2020). While there are very real differences between *kotis*, *hijras*, and gays, they are at some level, and just like the *koti*/*panti* pair, also ideal types. In fact, I argue that Amin invoked them precisely as such, namely as a means to clarify something for me, a foreigner. What made the juxtaposition of *kotis*, *hijras*, and gays *meaningful* in the context of the above ethnographic scene is not only what separates them but also what they have in common: the ethical labor of queerness.

As Brian Horton suggests in his work with LGBTQ+ activists from Mumbai (who could just as easily have been from Bangalore), "inhabiting contradictions between queer and normative—failing to ever be fully one or the other—is perhaps the substance central to queer experience" (Horton 2018, 1061). I propose ethical labor as an analytical tool to further refine this insight by describing queerness not only as an experiential "substance," but as an ethical project of cultivating "the ability to thrive and flourish within a socially- and historically-located form of ethical life" (Laidlaw 2017, 6). Ethics refers here not only to an engagement with specific moral norms but to both explicit and implicit ways—at times coerced, at times chosen—to work on and with the structural contradictions of the normative itself (cf. Hendriks 2023). This is where ethical labor entails but also moves beyond forms of care work or work on the self. As a metaphor, labor allows to highlight the productive aspects of "the queer art of failure" (Halberstam 2011), its life-affirming role in sustaining the social, and its horizons of utopic possibility (Muñoz 2009). However, it also compels attention to its devastating aspects (Love 2007) because, in contrast to the more neutral "work," it stresses the cruel inequities of its political, moral, and affective economies. If queerness arises from within the contradictions of the normative, not everyone is equally compelled to dwell in those contradictions, and their costs and rewards are skewed and unequally distributed.

Coda

"Is the suit for you?", the tailor asked, with a snide smile. Maybe I imagined the smile, I admit; yet snideness lay in the question itself. It lay in the unremarkable ordinariness with which it enacted the compulsory nature of marriage and the impending temporality of its denial of the life of the *koti*.

"When is it your turn?", the tailor insisted.

And so did Amin, absconding from the scene, but doing so flamboyantly, as if enacting the contradiction of queerness: its "hyper (in)visibility" (Reddy 2005, 2) in the social formation that it sustains while being denied. He enacted it in the wild fury of his middle finger to the Old City, which absconded in the speed of the scooter and in our purgative laughter at its futility. Amin avers that he will not marry, but friends who know him and his family suspect it is just a matter of time. When I last met him, five years later, he told me he had cut ties to his family, not speaking to anyone. He had moved out. And yet, he remained close, barely two blocks from his grandparents' house. The norm is relentless. And so is Amin's labor.

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