

'We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted,  
while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in  
our corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.'<sup>1</sup>

## **WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY? THREE STORIES OF INDIAN<sup>2</sup> WOMEN LOVING WOMEN IN JOZI<sup>3</sup>**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The apartheid regime enforced their segregationist politics with spatial policies such as the Group Areas Act of 1950. Indians, Coloureds and Blacks were moved out of demarcated White areas, and confined to their group's 'ethnic' enclave, which inevitably meant an inferior township a distance away from the city centre and White suburbs. People were classified according to their phenotype and placed in their demarcated township (Ebr.-Vally, 2001). Areas such as Lenasia, Roshnee, or Laudium in the Transvaal, Chatsworth or Phoenix in Natal and Rylands in the Cape, were established for the Indian population. Spatial movement and social mobility were not the only restrictions placed on South Africans; sexuality and interracial interaction were also restricted under the Immorality Act of 1957, which criminalized cross racial sexual relationships,

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1 Audre Lorde, 1980, *Sister Outsider*, p42

2 South Africans who can trace some aspect of their heritage to the continent of India, the Indian diaspora. Indian identity in this instance is viewed as a social identity constructed by the apartheid regime but reworked by the people in their daily lived realities and in their performance of 'being Indian.'

3 Popular name for the city.

along with prostitution and a variety of other sexual acts that were deemed deviant by the state. By the late 1980s, the apartheid state was not particularly interested in punishing acts of immorality and the law was finally declared unlawful under the current political dispensation. The democratic Constitution of South Africa ensures freedom of movement or the right to sexual freedom (The Constitution of RSA, 1994). Such political gains unfortunately do hide social bias for despite a progressive and value neutral Constitution, sexual freedom remains a struggle. For example, women who choose to love other women or anyone who chooses to live outside of the heterosexual paradigm might experience hostility from a host of sources: their family, their neighbours, religious groups and all in society who view same sex relations as wrong or even evil. A gap exists between viewing sexuality as a political right as expressed in the Constitution and transforming that acquired right into a social reality for many. Same sex is no longer a criminal offence but this does not mean that anti-homosexual feelings have dissipated in society. This study will examine such issues by focusing on Indian women who love women (WLW)<sup>4</sup> and their experiences of space and sexuality. How did they express their same desire during the Apartheid era and is it any different today?

Living in a former Indian area<sup>5</sup>, Lenasia, the quasi-absence of WLW in the public sphere is conspicuous. It is apparent that people with same sex desires do exist in the townships, as a lesbian I am proof of that fact. Yet, the public image created is that same sex desire is not an Indian 'thing'. Where do Indian gays and lesbians go? How do they fulfil their same sex desires? How do they deal with the pressures of marriage and other heteronormative requirements? My

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<sup>4</sup> Some women might not embrace the title of lesbian or homosexual but they are women who love women. The term is intended to be more inclusive to include the varied political and personal expressions of sexuality. By using the term women who love women I give the space to my informants to name or un-name themselves as they see fit. My intention is to view sexuality on a continuum rather than a defined static mode of being.

<sup>5</sup> While I use the word former to signify that the Group Areas Act is no longer in effect and people enjoy social mobility, these spaces are still predominately Indian with a handful of Black people moving into the area. The same can be said of Black and Coloured townships.

study is thus concerned with the experiences and positions of Indian WLW who have lived in Indian areas. In essence this study asks one main question:

**How do Indian WLW negotiate ‘invisibility’ and ‘silence’ and under what circumstances do they ‘make’ and live their lives?**

### **Aim and Rationale**

The aim of this research is to document the life stories of three Indian women loving women living in the city of Johannesburg or Jozi<sup>6</sup>. The intention of this thesis is to ‘uncover’ and understand the societal forces at play that render WLW and their relationships ‘mute’ in such spaces. The Indian community in particular seems to endorse heteronormative ideals in the form of marriage, and surveillance of women’s bodies (Sharma, 2006). This study will explore the spaces that women are expected to occupy and the repercussions of resisting ‘social controls’ systemic of the varied patriarchies<sup>7</sup> and heteronormativity that exist.

There are a number of reasons why this study is important:

Research on Indian WLW in South Africa has not been well documented<sup>8</sup>. Issues relating to WLW and all other alternative interpretations to the heterosexual model are viewed as marginal

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<sup>6</sup> Popular name for the city, implying urban savvy. Brands such as Jozi FM Radio Station and the JoziMental clothing line show that Jozi is popular as a term of reference to the city of Johannesburg.

<sup>7</sup> For more on notions of varied patriarchies rather than one overarching patriarchy see Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. 1993,

<sup>8</sup> According to the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) in Johannesburg, which is regarded as the most comprehensive gay and lesbian archives in the country, this is an area where the Archives needs data.

concerns. Current discussions on women's sexuality tend to focus on reproductive rights and HIV/AIDS, operating on the assumption that the 'woman' as a standard category of analysis is heterosexual (Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999). Within feminist circles lesbian issues are still considered fringe concerns if accepted at all. Often the inclusion of lesbian issues onto the agenda is viewed as a 'Western imposition' and within African feminist circles the issue is hotly contested (Jolly, 2000). This investigation will provide some information on the varied '(homo)sexualities'<sup>9</sup> lived out in and around the city, as well as contribute to existing documentation in this domain.

Sexuality and particularly same-sexuality is viewed as a middle-class concern. Sexuality supposedly is not an issue 'the masses' have to deal with, as they have more pressing economic concerns. To draw a distinction between economics and sexuality is short-sighted, as usually it is economically marginalised, WLW, who are on the 'frontline' in the battle against homophobia<sup>10</sup>. As noted by Bhaskaran (2006:113), 'socio-economic class is used to dismiss political interrogations of normative sexuality and gender' yet it is these normative institutions related to sexuality and gender 'that structure and displace the economic and political wellbeing and lives of WLW' (Bhaskaran, 2004:113). This study thus challenges myopic perspectives on sexuality.

Usually the life story approach is saved for the iconic alpha male figurehead such as heads of state, business entrepreneurs and sports stars (Carole Boyce Davies: 1992). Women and their stories have been neglected. The feminist approach views the personal as political, through this lens, every woman's story is important, as it talks to the shared (albeit not the same)

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<sup>9</sup> I have used quotation marks as not everyone who is involved in same-sex relations sees themselves as homosexual.

<sup>10</sup> Zanele Muholi, *The Rose Has Thorns* visual exhibition. For a textual discussions see FEW newsletter For a textual discussions see FEW newsletter 3 Feb. – June 2006.

political experience of being a 'woman'. This approach gives depth to the complex mosaic that is life, and illustrates the many ways of being and exploring ones sexuality.

In this study I speak to Indian women who love women. I asked them about the first time they experienced romantic feelings for other women. When (if) and how did they 'come out'<sup>11</sup> to those around them? And how do they identify or name their own sexualities?

## **CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the following chapter I am going to discuss the theoretical constructs (discursive frameworks) that informed this work and set the context for my study. First I discuss how Apartheid marked the people and the landscape. Then I discuss gay history in South Africa. I look at how a highly segregated and stratified gay community emerged, dominated by White men who strategically disassociated themselves from transformative undercurrents and revolutionary action happening around them. Post 1994 activists were able to secure freedom of sexual expression as a right in the Constitution of South Africa. However societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians remain hostile especially in Black townships, where to date the bulk of violent 'hate' crimes are committed against WLW<sup>12</sup>. I discuss the identity category of Indian, as related to space, gender, sexual and social obligations. I talk about the uses of silence as that is an important theme in stories of homosexuality. And finally I qualify my usage of the term women who love women (WLW) by situating the term in the discourse of naming sexuality.

### **APARTHEID – THE RACIALISATION OF THE LANDSCAPE AND ITS PEOPLE**

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<sup>11</sup> The process of declaring your homosexuality to yourself and those around you.

<sup>12</sup> On 7 July 2007, two lesbians, Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Masooa were brutalized and killed in Soweto. They were followed home from a known lesbian and gay friendly bar raped and murdered, the perpetrators seem to be known to the community but to date no arrests have been made. This case is one of many hate-crimes experienced by black women in townships across the country as a result of their sexuality.

In an attempt to protect the racial purity of the White nation during the Apartheid era, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950), criminalized sexual relationships across 'race' lines, along with prostitution and a variety of other sexual acts deemed deviant (Terreblanche, 2002). Fear of the Black majority meant that any perceived threat stemming from unrestrained and uncontained sexualities was enough for the state to embark on repressive measures restricting the freedom of expression for both heterosexuals and homosexuals.<sup>13</sup>

The Population Registration Act (1950) classified the South African people into one of four 'race' categories; White, Indian, Coloured and Black – in that order of racial hierarchy. The Black category was then further sub-divided down into ethnic groups. Individuals were classified and grouped according to their 'apparent phenotype and through a wide array of religious, linguistic and cultural criteria ... clothing and social habits' (Ebr.-Vally, 2001:52). By classifying the population into 'groups' the state was able to segregate South Africans across racial lines thus ensuring White supremacy. The Group Areas Act relocated thousands of Black, Indian and Coloured families placing them into ethnic enclaves. Whites benefited from the new spatial arrangement of the country enjoying usage of a disproportionate amount of prime land (Terreblanche: 2002). Indians in Johannesburg were moved from town and surrounding areas to Lenasia and other demarcated Indian areas in the then Transvaal, like Laudium in Pretoria or Zinniaville in Rustenburg. As noted by Ebr.-Vally (2001:51) 'The Group Areas Act locked and bolted society in such a tangible and objective manner that communication between individuals from the different groups became almost impossible.' Space became racialised.

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that from the onset the discourse of sexuality is tied to that of race in South Africa, due to the dominance of the race discourse in the political landscape of South Africa

## ***GAY (HIS)TORY<sup>14</sup> IN SOUTH AFRICA***

The popular belief about homosexuality on the continent is that it is 'unnatural' and 'un-African'<sup>15</sup> (Epprecht, 1998). Although same-sex relationships have always been a part of African societies<sup>16</sup>, there has been a tendency to view such relationships through a Eurocentric and heteronormative lens (Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999). If homosexuality was discussed in Black African communities it was seen as a White plague, or an indicator of economic and therefore social bankruptcy of the Black man/community by an oppressive Apartheid regime (Harries, 1990) (Moodie, 1994) (Junod, 1962).

A French missionary by the name of, Henri Junod (1962)<sup>17</sup> documented male same-sex relations, which he termed the 'un Civilised Vice', in the mine compounds on the Witwatersrand. Junod (1962) attributed the erosion of the tribal African heterosexual way of life, to the harsh living conditions found in the mine compounds. Marxist writers such as Moodie (1994) and Harries (1982) attributed 'caceral' accounts of homosexual behaviour amongst African men to

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14 I have used selective brackets to signify the skewed account of LGBTQI history in South Africa, which tends to see the 'past' through the eyes of the white gay male

15 For more on this notion of homosexuality as a White export see the works of missionaries such as Henri Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe* (1962), he dedicates a section in the appendix to the 'uncivilised vice' that was perverting the native on the mine compounds. He attributed this deviant behaviour to White encroachment on the Native way of Life. In modern times many political on the continent leaders have adopted this stance of viewing homosexuality as 'un-African' most notably Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. In fact South Africa is the only country on the continent and one of the few in the world where gay people can marry. For more on the situation of lesbians and gays on the continent of African visit <http://www.mask.org.za/>

16 While many societies exhibit forms of 'homosexual behaviour' (as defined by our culture) not every society attaches sexual behaviour to sexual identity. As noted by Michel Foucault one of the seminal writers on the relationships between power and sexuality, found that in Western society the sexual category of the 'homosexual' was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For examples of homosexuality in South Africa see *Defiant Desire* Eds. Gevisser, M. & Cameron, E., 1994. As well as ed Stephen O. Murray & Will Roscoe *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, 1998

17 Junod .H, "APPENDIX III. Unnatural Vice in the Johannesburg Compounds 1916." *The Life of a South African Tribe*", Volume 1, 1962.

poor living conditions indicative of the racist capitalist society and forced wage labour situation<sup>18</sup>. These accounts demonstrate the heteronormative and culturally biased lens adopted by many researchers, which ignores historical context, where African sexualities are viewed as homogenous, devoid of diversity dynamism and colourful expression. It is this rhetoric of understanding same-sex desires as a 'White thing' which has made it difficult for lesbians and gays of colour to declare their sexuality openly and proudly.

Government reports from the 1960's talk about 'instances of homosexuality' as 'isolated experiences' afflicting only White men<sup>19</sup>. Black homosexuals did not concern the state because it meant that White women were safe from the 'virile' and 'potent' sexuality of Black men (Ratele, 2006). In 1966 a police raid on a house in Forest Town Johannesburg publicised the fact that 'gay parties were alive and well in the Republic of South Africa' (Gevisser, 1994:37), which prompted the government to formulate a task-team whose purpose was to assess the degree of damage homosexuality had unleashed onto the unsuspecting nation. The threat of the state's repressive policies on homosexuality, prompted gay men to form the gay rights movement called the Homosexual Law Reform Fund (*GALA Archives*). This movement was required to present an argument to the Commission on behalf of homosexuals in support of their 'lifestyle'. The Movement remained careful not to align themselves with Black anti-Apartheid movements. As noted by Gevisser,

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<sup>18</sup> See Harries .P, "Kinship, ideology and the nature of pre-colonial labour migration: labour migration from the Delagoa Bay hinterland to South Africa, up to 1895", in *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African class formation, culture and consciousness 1870-1930*, eds. Shula Marks & Richard Rathbone, 142-160 1982, Longman: NY and Moodie .D .T, *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration*, 1994, Witwatersrand University Press: Johannesburg

<sup>19</sup> See Gevisser, M., "A different fight for freedom: A history of South African lesbian and gay organisation from the 1950's to 1990s", p37. in *Defiant Desire*, Eds. Gevisser, M. & Cameron, E, 1994, Braamfontein: Raven Press as well as Bell .D & Valentine .G, *Mapping Desire: geographies of sexualities*, 1995, Routledge: London



In response to the threat of criminalisation, some gay South Africans – urban, White and middle-class – had organised themselves for the first time, not surprisingly very much the way gay Americans had in the 1950s: quietly and professionally, attempting to protect themselves by carving a niche within apartheid South Africa while not disrupting the status quo. (1994: 35)

This non-alignment with the broader plight of Black South Africans made it difficult for Black gays to ‘come out’ and align themselves with the gay movement. According historical archives there wasn’t much gay activity in the townships until the late 70’s early 80’s. This is indicative of the bias towards white male stories in the LGBTQI archives. This memory loss has begun to be addressed by varied projects aimed at collecting stories from Black townships in South Africa<sup>20</sup>. In addition, people were not mobilising politically around sexuality at the time, instead social and political upheaval in the country meant that people were challenging the system of Apartheid, it was a time of resistance. Black gay struggle activists such as Simon Nkoli and Beverly Ditsie mobilised themselves, and in 1984 the Saturday Group was formed representing homosexuals from the township (Gevisser, 1994). Before this initiative homosexuality in the Black community had received little or no attention.

This absence of issues of sexuality and homosexuality from the liberation discourse was seen to be politically motivated. The primary focus of the liberation movement was the fight against Apartheid and not against heteronormativity (Nkoli in Gevisser, 1994). Therefore Black activists were faced with the dilemma of prioritising one identity over another<sup>21</sup> for the ‘greater good of the people’. As noted by Kleinbooi in Gevisser 1994, many gay activists placed their political obligations before their sexuality given the context of Apartheid South Africa. By viewing

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20 For more see the GALA archives particularly the work done by Zanele Muholi, Busi Kheswa, Mary Louw and Zethu Matebeni

21 For more see Hein Kleinbooi “Identity Crossfire: On being a Black ay student activist” and Simon Nkoli “Coming out as a Black gay activist in South Africa” both in *Defiant Desire*, Eds. Gevisser, M. & Cameron, E, 1994,

homosexuality as a phenomenon foreign to Black culture(s), issues of heteronormativity and skewed gender relations within the liberation movement and society in general could be skirted<sup>22</sup>.

The three amendments made to the clause moved the 'gay community' indoors into the safe spaces of clubs and bars in the city. The effects of the amendments were such that a highly stratified 'gay community' emerged in South Africa, dominated by White middle class men as spaces in city (and therefore gay spaces as well) were reserved for 'Whites only'. The gay club scene was rapidly expanding in downtown Johannesburg Hillbrow and Braamfontein but Black men and women were legally prohibited from entering these clubs (Gevisser, 1994). There was little interaction across the colour lines and when Blacks tried to gain access to White gay clubs the environment was very hostile. Blacks, who were socialising in the townships, claimed space in straight venues such as pool halls and shebeens (Interview with Anthony Manion)<sup>23</sup>.

According to Gevisser 'lesbians were ignored by the law and media but experienced pressure to keep their sexual orientation closeted'<sup>24</sup>. Black lesbians would mix with gay men at venues such as the Skyline bar in Hillbrow, but there was never any exclusively 'lesbian' space<sup>25</sup>. Historically, locally and international it is always gay men who are more 'visible' in the public sphere. This is due to the fact that men are able to own and claim public space whereas women are constantly relegated to the private sphere (Abu-Lughod, 1993)<sup>26</sup>.

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22 Black homosexual activists have grappled with the issue of the 'hierarchies of oppression' and the acknowledgement of the body being the site of convergence and divergence of multiple identities. See Essex Hemphill. bell hooks. Cornell West.

23 Interview with Archivist from the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA). Gays frequented 'Ma Thoko's' in Kwa-Tema, Mhlangu Rocks and 39 Legoda Street in Soweto

24 Gevisser, M., "A different fight for freedom: A history of South African lesbian and gay organisation from the 1950's to 1990s", p35. in *Defiant Desire*, Eds. Gevisser, M. & Cameron, E, 1994. p6.

25 Mary Louw's work looking to address these gaps in historical knowledge.

26 Abu-Lughod, L. 1993. *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. LA: University of California Press.

## **The Constitution: Legal Progress and Social Unfreedom**

The presence of Black activists like Simon Nkoli and Beverly Ditsie did much to publicise the political agenda of homosexual people in South Africa. They viewed true liberation to be a multi pronged process challenging the serfdom imposed not just in the political arena. For them there could be no liberation without sexual liberation, the two issues were inextricably linked, to the broader emancipation of the soul.

Because the contestation was coming from within their own ranks, the African National Congress (ANC) soon adopted a stance of 'tolerance' towards those involved in same-sex relationships<sup>27</sup>. Along with democracy, came sexual freedom. The South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996, declares it illegal to 'discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone' because of their sexual orientation<sup>28</sup>. Gays and lesbians enjoy a greater visibility in the public sphere, more than ever before as a result of the new political dispensation<sup>29</sup>.

While legally, those involved in same-sex relationships are protected as a minority group, the lived reality of many involved in same-sex relationships is far from this utopia. Black WLW in

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27 For more on gays and law in South Africa as well the particular stances adopted by each political party when the issue of freedom of sexual orientation was presented see Edwin Cameron "'Unhapprehended Felons' Gays and lesbians and the law in South Africa in in *Defiant Desire*, Eds. Gevisser, M. & Cameron, E, 1994

28 The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Act 108 of 1996. As adopted on 8 May 1996 amended on 11 October 1996 by the Constitutional Assembly.

29 Television programmes and sitcoms like *Isidingo* and *Zero Tolerance* have characters that are homosexual. But to date the most realistic representation of lesbians on TV has been on the drama *Society*. The show which aired on Thursday evenings at 9pm on SABC 1 (in four parts) followed the trials and tribulations of four twenty-something up and coming Black women in Jozi. Although some erotic scenes were edited from the show because it was deemed 'too much for viewers' by the head of the drama genre at the SABC, it was on this show that Black lesbians were shown for the first time as sexual beings and beings in their entirety – removed from victimology

the townships seem to be most affected by the homophobia that exists in our society, and are often subject to many forms of abuse in the townships<sup>30</sup>.

Using a rights based approach, gays and lesbians have turned a taboo into a political gain. The most recent being the Civil Unions Bill, which allows for same sex marriages is a case in point. However this gain is marred by the reality that to date it has only been middle-class gays and lesbians who have been able to evoke the Constitution, as most gays and lesbians who are not part of the middle class remain disadvantaged. They do not have the means to pursue their rights and are therefore marginalised by the middle-class legal system<sup>31</sup>. Thus we can argue that 'freedom' is enjoyed by a few who have the means to actualise their rights as citizens.

The stark reality is that much ground still needs to be covered in creating access for all to our legal institutions. Furthermore the existing heteronormative and skewed gender relations in our society make it difficult for people with same sex desires to live a life of their own making openly without declaration. Sexuality, as Gayle Rubin argues, is believed to be a private issue<sup>32</sup>, thus

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<sup>30</sup> Muholi, Zanele, 2003, *The Rose Has Thorns*. Zanele Muholi's powerful piece documents the stories of Black lesbian women who have been, raped, murdered, abducted, beaten and verbally abused in the townships of Johannesburg. In most instances the women were butch and raped to 'cure' them of their lesbianism. This shows how our understanding of sexuality is tied to fixed gender roles and that homosexuality is viewed as an abomination in the township. Work done by Black lesbians has done much to shed light on the Black lesbian experience however what I find particularly alarming is the prevalence of mediated story telling via some expert in the field of academia. Stories are appropriated for forwarding academic careers rather than sharing experiences, connecting to human beings, and generating new and radical bodies of knowledge. Lives lived are broken down into palatable themes for the academy which is a very small audience indeed. *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives*, by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wierenga, is in my opinion one of those cases where the creative production is far removed from the context of the stories. In addition if it was not for the fieldworkers who were in some instances insiders, the authors would themselves have been denied access into the lives. I think that 'experts' should facilitate the process if needs be but not own it and claim a writing credit.

<sup>31</sup> All of the cases relating to issues of sexual rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) communities, have been brought to the Constitutional Court by White middle class South Africans. According to clerks at the Constitutional Court it is very expensive to present your case in Constitutional Court and increasingly difficult if you are not English speaking.

<sup>32</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. 1993. NY: Routledge. For a South African account see Posel, D. 2004, "'Getting the Nation Talking about Sex': Reflections on the Politics of Sexuality and 'Nation-Building' in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Draft.

making it difficult for LGBTQI organisations to mobilise support around sexual activism. It is evident that the gay community is split.

Having discussed the historical trajectory of the LGBTQI movement in the country it becomes apparent that the community is split along racial, spatial, gender and class lines. Although it was and still is Black gays and lesbians who fought for political equality, the LGBTQI community appears to be dominated by middle class White male interests. Black women in the townships bear the brunt of homophobic violent attacks, and to date most gay friendly spaces are situated closer to town away from the townships. Even 'safe spaces'<sup>33</sup> cease to be safe in the township setting<sup>34</sup>. Therefore given the clear and present threat faced by WLW in the townships it is understandable that many would chose<sup>35</sup> to remain silent about their sexual preferences, at least until one is able to leave home and the township space as it becomes apparent that it is safer and easier to be gay in town than in it is in the townships. In this instance we are privy to the complexities in notions such as choice when it is clear that the options are few, choice in this instance becomes more about survival than freedom to be as one chooses. Given that there is little cohesion and coherence of message or adequate support networks available within the lesbian and gay community, identification with the broader LGBTQI movement by Indian WLW (who are less visible) is uncommon. While the Constitution protects the right to freedom of sexual expression access to sexual rights and varied sexual perspectives in South Africa is limited.

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33 Spaces where gay people can meet free from outside i.e. heterosexual scrutiny or harassment.

34 Recently lesbians were murdered by men who followed the couple from a lesbian owned and LGBTQI friendly bar in Soweto.

35 Although I use the word chose, I do so with an awareness of the complexities of personal agency and notions of choice.

The section that follows discusses aspects of Indian identity exploring how issues of sexuality and cultural (or 'racial') identities intersect under the new political dispensation, and how this influences our socio-spatial arrangements.

## **INDIAN IDENTITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

### **Social Relations Organised Along Racial Categories**

South Africa has a history of viewing race as the common denominator and the main point of classification, from the colonial encounter to Apartheid, when this classification was legislated (Terreblanche: 2002). As mentioned earlier Acts such as the Population Registration Act, and the Immorality Amendment Act No. 21 of 1950 organised social relations along racial lines, the Apartheid government institutionalised race relations and existing divisions on the basis of differentiation (Terreblanche, 2002). As noted by Ebr.-Vally (2001:52) the state limited the expression of identity, stripping individuals of the right to define themselves. The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) led by the likes of Steve Biko and Mamphela Ramphele challenged this forced differentiation and called on Black<sup>36</sup> South Africans to unite and fight against Apartheid. To present a united front differences were ignored, but this did not mean that the power relations present in society (for example skewed gender relations) were not present in the movement<sup>37</sup>.

### **Culturally Loaded Space**

<sup>36</sup> In the BCM Black encompassed Indian, Coloured and Black Africans. BCM called for the liberation of the Black mind from its inherent inferiority complex. BCM encouraged all people to free themselves from mental slavery.

<sup>37</sup> Mamphela Ramphele, 1995, *A Life*, Cape Town: David Phillip Publishers. Jameela too had experienced this within the ANC.

This division based on race is also a pervasive cultural marker on the landscape of the country. Legislation such as the Group Areas Act created ethnic enclaves, by explicitly linking race to space. This notion of 'race' groups as a homogenous collective ignored the social differentiation amongst the people who comprise the category, propelling one possible point of identity affiliation above all others. For example spaces such as Lenasia (the Indian township I originate from), were demarcated 'Indian areas' in the Transvaal.

Space is more than just a 'passive locus of social relations' (Lefebvre, 2001:31). People give meaning and vibrancy to space and the space gives meaning to people. While the history of these township spaces is in essence tied to violence (forced removals) people were able to cultivate communal values. Away from the variance and cosmopolitanism of the city, the township space is seen to be one of 'consistency and community' (Khunou, 2004:500). I can directly relate to this notion because the same can be said of Lenasia, the Indian township I am from. In Lenasia I am not a stranger, I am familiar due to my familial ties, my roots. I would not be anonymous in the public spaces of Lenasia. The members of my community know who my father is and who my grandfather was, they would be able to locate me almost immediately, depending on their age group. Even though I no longer live in the space, when I return to Lenasia the space itself exerts a social pull and I behave accordingly. For instance even though my family are aware of the fact that I smoke, I would not do so publically or in front of my parents. Belonging to a community means that certain expectations, roles and responsibilities are thrust onto members of the community. The space is able to exert a real social force on its inhabitants, pulling them into accordance with prevailing social mores.

According to Terreblanche (2002), the architecture and ideology of the township space resulted in privacy being a luxury for its inhabitants. This means that if you blatantly transgress

social mores the news will eventually reach your family and you would be answerable for your actions. As a child you are warned that you must behave appropriately else people will talk. People are expected to police themselves out of fear of being socially ostracised by the very community from which they gain their self definition. This concern of “what will people say?” functions as a social control mechanism as it surreptitiously prevents people from transgressing accepted social norms particularly sexual ones.

### **South African Indian Identity**

Race is not naturalised category, race is about cultural formations (Erasmus, 2001). In South Africa these cultural formations were ‘born of appropriation, dispossession and translation in the colonial encounter’ (Erasmus, 2001:16). Indian is not just a label imposed on a group of people by Whites, or White dominated political institutions. People as social actors have themselves worked and reworked these identities in their daily lived realities (Erasmus, 2001:16). There are a few notions which are particularly important to the conception and performance of ‘Indianess’ in the following section I shall discuss some of them.

The Indian community in South Africa can trace its roots to the sub-continent of India when the area was a British colony. The vast majority came as indentured labourers to work on the sugar cane plantations in Natal in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (F. Meer, 1999). Later they were joined by passenger Indians, called such because they were able to pay their way (ship fare) to South Africa (Y.S Meer, 1980). Indians were viewed as foreigners, and attempts were made to repatriate the group, even though by 1927, almost all of the Indian population was South Africa



born (Ramamurthi, 1999: vi). Eventually the state accepted their presence and allowed the South African Indian population to stay on their native soil.

Religion and linguistic origins are dominant dimensions of Indian identity (Ebr.-Vally, 2001). This does not mean that they are able to speak any of the languages from India, as generally Indians are English-speaking, this cultural locator points to the region of India their ancestors would have come from. The descendants of the indentured labourers are from the south of India and therefore belong predominantly to the Tamil and Telegu speaking community. The descendents of the passenger Indians are from the north of India, and speak Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu and other dialects. As noted by Fatima Meer (1999:103) 'inwardly family ties and religion keep them firmly together.' Indians are constructed as being extremely cultured beings (Bhaskaran, 2002). Notions such as honour and respectability as well as practices such as marriage are all important to the conception and performance of Indian identity.

### **Walking around the Fire: Marriage as a rites of passage.**

'Marriage is by far the most important occasion in an Indian family, regardless of its faith. Marriage represents the union of two families and two fraternities. It also celebrates the couple's entry into adulthood and accompanying responsibilities.' (Ebr.-Vally, 2001:146). Marriage is not just an act for yourself; your marriage is attributed social status and is a reflection on your family. You gain socially by marrying 'well'. 'Well' in this instance means to marry into a financially successful and socially respectable family, preferably of the same religious denomination.

Sex outside of marriage is frowned on. The heterosexual marriage union is the only sanctioned space for you to explore your sexuality. This form of sexuality is seen as productive

because it is tied to reproduction (Rubin, 1984). Sexuality in this instance is tied to particular gender roles and responsibilities as dictated by culture. The woman body by virtue of the uterus is expected to bear children, she is expected to maintain the home and look after the children. The husband is expected to leave the home, find work and bring home a pay check. These 'natural' roles are social constructs. These gender limits have the result of inhibiting the free sexual expression of women and men in the community. The expression of your personal sexuality is loaded because it is tied social transgression or acceptance, i.e. your sexuality can determine whether you are a 'good girl' or a 'bad girl'.

### **Good Girls and Bad Girls: Women's Sexualities**

Heterosexuality is assumed: therefore socialisation across the gender lines is discouraged. Parents are protective of their girl children, and boys are represented as predators after one thing. Girls are expected to remain untouched, unsoiled, and virginal till marriage. Female sexuality is constructed as passive, receptive to masculine sexuality, denying women sexual agency (Bhaskaran, 2002).

The gender role of woman or girl is important to Indian identity and the collective memory of 'Indianess'. Women and girls carry the honour of the family name – they do this by remaining 'respectable' which means they do not run the streets with boys/men. Premarital sex let alone pregnancy, is highly frowned upon and families are expected to become guardians by controlling the unchaperoned movements of unmarried young women. The following popular dictum among Indians illustrates this well: There are two kinds of girls, *good* girls and *bad* girls. *Good* Indian girls stay at home chaste, learning their domestic duties, and studying for school. *Bad* girls

roam the streets with the boys. Men and boys are expected to have an active sexuality while women and girls are expected to be chaste and spurn the advances of the opposite sex.

The outside is seen to be the domain of men and, women found there compromise their right to protection and freedom. The rationale is that a woman found outside is no longer believed to be 'decent' and 'pure' instead she is now corrupted by the ways of the street, unless she presents herself in a way that is consistent with the 'decent' and 'modest' woman model i.e. a socially sanctioned femininity. As a young girl you are presented with two options: shame or respectability<sup>38</sup>. Gender roles in the Indian community are clearly defined. Women are expected to be domesticated and occupy the home space, the private arena is her domain. Men occupy the outside space, where they participate in the public arena as full citizens<sup>39</sup>. Although the private space is constructed as a safe space many women experience abuse in their homes (POWA website). The various cultural patriarchies that interplay in society are threatened by the agency of women, therefore women bodies are controlled via violence to keep them in check. Gender based violence is about power relationships, indicative of the inferiority complex present in the perpetrator rooted in the skewed relations that exist between men and women.

### ***What Will People Say? Honour and Respectability***

Honour and respectability are important to notions of self worth and status in the Indian community (Bhaskaran, 2002). The respectability and honour of the family name is tied to the actions of the family members. The family is then answerable to the broader community

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<sup>38</sup> See *Coloured By History Shaped By Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* – edited by Zimitri Erasmus, 2001, for discussions in the Coloured community.

<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that the category 'men', as women, is not a homogenous one. Men do not experience citizenship the same

(Sharma, 2006) (Abu-Lughod, 1993). People wish to accrue social capital by behaving in accordance with social precepts. This notion of personal patrol/censorship in accordance with normative social behaviour is encompassed by the frequently evoked adage: What will people say? The fear of people gossiping about your social and particularly sexual indiscretions is enough to keep you in check. Rather than be exposed for 'wrong doing' and deviance people opt for discretion and in the case of WLW silence seems to be the most self (pre)serving option. The community is seen to be your primary source of support therefore by behaving in a manner which is deemed 'un-Indian', can result in your alienation by the broader Indian community. Given the importance placed on marriage in the Indian community, Indian WLW face the real fear of alienation by their families and extended community as a result of their sexual preferences.

### **Silence And Secrecy**

Growing up you are warned that you must behave in accordance with social mores else people will talk; what will people say if they find out/if your transgression is exposed? Worrying about what people will say is not indicative of sexual transgression alone, but rather this concern applies to all forms of 'social deviance' – when you step out of line the morality of an entire

community is there to set you straight. The family name, honour and respectability is important in this context. The notion of honour applies preservation of the family name and respectability is important in this context.

Rather than be exposed as a deviant (which could bring disrepute and shame to the family), those who operate against accepted societal/sexual behaviour do so outside of public view. Given the climate many Indian WLW choose to be silent about their love affairs. They use silence to protect themselves from public scrutiny and penetration into their lives. Yet it can be this very silence which renders their form of living and loving 'invisible' as their 'not saying' maintains the status quo. African homosexuality has been 'suppressed through isolation and conspiracy(-ies) of silence (Pitani quoted by Machera, 2004:157). Many Indian WLW are protectively silent about their sexualities because of the taboo that is associated with same-sex desires. Your sexuality is not just a private affair it is a matter that concerns the family and community as a whole. Keeping up appearances and maintaining one's social status is of the utmost importance.

Recently I went to a book launch entitled *Undoing the Silence*, the author, Louise Dunlap had this to say about silence: "Silencing isn't just personal, though it can feel that way. When so many are affected, there's something going on across the board." She spoke about Paulo Freire's seminal work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and his notion of the 'culture of silence', whereby the oppressed takes on the thinking of the oppressor and becomes afraid to speak their own truth<sup>40</sup> (Dunlap, 2007:15). This stuck with me as it spoke to my experience as an Indian WLW, and as a writer. It is difficult even dangerous to speak your truth when what you say runs contradictory to the norm, which is why some people do not speak, even when they have things to say.

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<sup>40</sup> Louise was reading from her book and engaging in discussions. Dunlap, L, 2007, *Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing*. New Village Press: Oakland, p15.

It is important to note that not all silences are restrictive. In some instances silence can serve to protect, for example being silent gives one time to regroup before action. Silence can be powerful but only if it is chosen. According to Srivastava (2003:2) 'different sites of secrecy can tell us something about the relationships of material and cultural power that need to be addressed in our projects of social change.'

### **The Politics of Sexuality and Name Calling- The Term WLW**

Sexuality is a political phenomenon; this means our understanding of that which we call sexuality is fashioned in part by existing and shifting power relations. There exists a hierarchy of sexual behaviours, which shows us that sexuality is tied to social status, and is relational (Rubin, 1984). Theorists have demonstrated how sexual behaviour has come to be associated with sexual identity in the Western world (Foucault, 1976) (Rubin, 1984) (Weeks, 1989) In fact the category of homosexual is a recent development (Foucault, 1976). Therefore engaging in same-sex relations does not necessitate identification with a homosexual identity. As noted by Rothblum (2000:194) "When a woman says that she is a 'lesbian' we may take for granted that this identity includes homogeneity of sexual behaviour, sexual fantasies and participation in a lesbian community" (Rothblum, 2000:194).<sup>41</sup> In actual fact a fair number of women who engage in same-sex behaviour do not necessarily associate their sexuality with a sexual identity (Blumberg & Soal, 1997). From these instances it becomes apparent that sexuality is about the meaning attached to the actions, not just the behaviour.

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<sup>41</sup> Rothblum, E ,D., "Sexual Orientation and Sex in Women's Lives", in *Journal of Social Issues*, vol.56, no.2, 2000, p194.

The term lesbian is associated with a particular political stance on gender and sexuality (Blackwood & Wieringa, 1999). As noted in a publication by the Pretoria based LGBTQI organisation OUT:

Lesbian women's identity is formed not by passive socialisation and adherence to cultural norms, but by a process of active engagement with identity formation through narrative and life choices.<sup>42</sup>

By using the term women who love women (WLW) I wanted to avoid dichotomous understandings of sexuality that fix you as 'straight' or 'lesbian' and to acknowledge that sexual behaviours and sexual identities are not collapsible into one (Weeks, 1991). By using the term WLW I would include those women who are open about their erotic relations with other women, yet who might not voluntarily affiliate their sexual behaviour to a sexual identity. This term WLW is a category for social analysis rather than a term used daily by women involved in sexual relationships with other women. In many instances this perpetual urge of the academy to 'name and self-define' doesn't seem to resonate with the majority of the people (Kolawole, 2004:252). However if we name the situations/realities that people experience we move them from the periphery to the centre, which signifies the changing conditions in cultures.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

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42 "Experiences and Dimensions of Power: Discussions with Lesbian Women" an OUT publication.

In this chapter I will present the methodologies used in collecting data. In discussing the research and methodological issues during the research, I will also address my methodology of selecting my informants.

### **The Importance of Experience and the Storytelling Imperative**

Adopting the perspective embraced by feminist and reflexive anthropological research methods, there was no 'objective scientist' that could claim total detachment from their study here (Kirtsoglou: 2004). The feminist researcher like the anthropologists –despite all advice to leave their person and their world behind- do take the very same with them to the field. In fact their world is them, and like everybody else they too need their world to filter the information they receive or collect. A major difference between the researcher and the informant is that the researcher is acutely aware of this dynamic.

Subject position can never be just a one line declaration of race, gender and class. As noted by Holland and Ramazanoglu 'If we locate the researcher as an actor in the research process, we open the way to recognition of the power relations within which the researcher is located' (1994:125). Each researcher brings their own expectations and assumptions to the research process. To be reflexive, means that I had to be aware of my position in relation to that of my informants. As a middle class, Indian, lesbian I had my own ideas of what it means to be 'Indian' or a 'lesbian'.

Feminist modes of research view the personal as political (Lorde, 1982). This mode of thinking validates women's personal experiences as a worthy knowledge base. By validated personal experiences, we challenge precedents that salute authoritative masculinities, to the exclusion of women and their stories (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994) (Lorde, 1982). I was privileging



personal experience as evidence for this study, as a result I decided on the life-history approach. I felt that this approach would be best suited to achieve my objective of reflecting life's multiplicities. Not only would the stories have depth and a personal feel, but this approach acknowledges that life, often over flows analytical categories. The life history approach subverts notions of homogeneity by focusing on the individual particularity (Abu-Lughod, 1991:12). By listening to the women and getting detailed accounts of their lives as they re-laid past experiences, I got to know who they are. By placing these lives within the socio-political, cultural, and historical context we get a sense of the freedoms and limitations of these freedoms experienced by each individual.

Rather than erase myself from my work I related my personal experiences to their stories. Given the inequalities that exist in the production of knowledge and storytelling, it is important that we tell our own stories, before they get told to us. As noted by Mamphela Ramphele writing your own story is an urgent project:

Storytelling is a historical imperative. We cannot successfully navigate uncharted waters without some script to guide us. This is particularly so for women, especially Black women. Women have to find a script, a narrative to live by, because all other scripts are likely to depict them in roles that fit the conventional stereotypes. Storytelling is also an urgent project for Black women in post Apartheid South Africa where so much forgetfulness is willed upon people.<sup>43</sup>

To avoid misrepresentation we should tell stories that represent the diversity of women's experiences. The representation of these varied experiences and particularly sexual experiences, challenge the normative race, gender, and cultural roles that exist to silence WLW in our society, The lived experiences of WLW are varied depending on their particular context. Therefore if we

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<sup>43</sup> Mamphela Ramphele, 1995, *A Life*, Cape Town: David Phillip Publishers.

ascribe to Bhattacharyya's assertion that sexuality is but 'one nodal point in a network, rather than a discrete object of scrutiny' (2002:21) then it becomes imperative to situate the discussion of sexuality within its particular socio-political, economic and historical context. Although my choice of informants is Indian women this discussion resonates with any woman living in a society dominated by heterosexual and gendered notions of love and family, looking for alternative modes of being.

The struggle for personal and sexual autonomy is a battle fought by many women the world over, especially women who choose outside of preordained sexual and gender roles. As noted by Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994:127) 'the different possible ways of knowing what gender is like, link theory, experience and our openness to hearing and conceptualizing the diversity of voices of different women'. This reading can be extended to include sexuality, viewed in this light stories of Indian WLW are far from marginal. Instead we start to interrogate the forces rendering these voices insignificant and marginal.

## **Recruitment Strategies**

### **Finding the Women**

For my study I knew that I wanted to speak to Indian women who were not secretive about their sexuality, because I wanted to know how they were able to resist normative gender and sexual roles, publically. There are many women who engage in same-sex relationships but they continue to maintain a heterosexual social identity. I wanted stories that actively challenged heteronormative ideals, I was looking for women who chose to live a different life. I didn't want

women who were living their desires in the 'closet'<sup>44</sup>. I also surmised that those who were open about their sexualities would be more likely to share their stories with me, than women who chose to be silent about their sexual relationships with women. I thought that there would be no concern about their stories 'leaking' and them being outed. On the contrary I faced a cul-de-sac, as many women who lived their same-sex desires publicly chose to do so outside of the community.

Finding women of Indian origin, with same sex desires, and who were prepared to share their life experiences with me, was more difficult than I imagined. The fact that I am an Indian WLW was not always an advantage. When I did locate WLW in Lenasia often they were reluctant to go on the record, this was due to my familial ties with the area. This led me to spread my net outside of Lenasia in the search for Indian WLW.

I was interested in finding out how they were able to transcend what was expected of them, and how those around them related to their evident 'difference'. Because of the nature of the research it took me a long time to find informants. I spent two years in the field, to find the relevant people, interview them, and collect the data. I started speaking to friends, family and colleagues explaining what my research was about. I asked them if they knew of any out Indian WLW who might be willing to participate in the research.

Following those conversations friends started responding to my requests to find Indian WLW. The first response was from Mimi, a fellow anthropologist at WITS, who said that she had a cousin Priya, from Lenz<sup>45</sup>, who was living an openly 'lesbian life' i.e. not hiding her sexuality. Mimi informed me that their family was unhappy with how Priya lived. Priya was not discrete about her relationships, and everyone in her street knew about her sexual preference for

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<sup>44</sup> The closet is queer theory is about being secretive and hiding or denying your homosexuality to yourself and/or to those around you.

<sup>45</sup> Lenz is the word used by the local inhabitants to describe the place Lenasia.

women. Mimi thought that it would be a good idea to link me with Priya for my research. I was eager to meet Priya. From what I had heard, she sounded like a fiercely independent character, and a possible candidate for my study. Unfortunately the meeting never materialised. After conferring with her mother, Mimi decided against introducing us. Mimi stated that given Priya's ill temper it would be unwise to pry into her life. Mimi, and more so her mother, did not want the family's 'dirty laundry' out there in print. Even though Priya's sexual preference is public knowledge, to have her life documented, discussed, and defined, cements a social transgression that the family would rather remain silent about. Priya was an unsuccessful attempt and I thus continued searching for other participants drawing on various social networks. As noted earlier my familial ties to the area and the taboo surrounding same sex relationships amongst women in the Indian community, made it difficult to find interviewees from Lenasia, therefore I decided to widen the spatial scope and look for Indian WLW all around Johannesburg.

My networks took me to the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) at Wits. I knew that GALA had been documenting and collecting stories of gay and lesbian people and from their fairly extensive network (with other organisations) I thought I would be able to source possible informants through them. I sourced assistance from a friend, Busi Kheswa, who works at the Gay and Lesbian Archives and has been collecting stories of black lesbians in the city. Through her network I was able to make contact with Fikile Vilakazi who was then working at the Equality Project.<sup>46</sup> Fikile's lover Vaneshree, is an out Indian WLW. In my meeting with Fikile, she was happy to put me into contact with Vaneshree, as Vaneshree always felt that she was the only Indian lesbian. When I contacted Vaneshree, she immediately agreed to be part of the research. My next informant, Jameela, I met through my sister's friend Bellim. Bellim's girlfriend is

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<sup>46</sup> A lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) rights based organisation with a long history of advocacy situated in Yeoville, Johannesburg.

Jameela's sister. When I told Bellim about my research he said that he would ask his friend, Jameela, if she wouldn't mind participating in this study. When I contacted Jameela, she was quite enthusiastic and happy to participate in the research. Preeti, my last informant, I heard about through mutual friends. When I contacted her, she too was keen to be part of the study.

My fieldwork area was not clearly demarcated. I did not have a place I could go to find Indian WLW. In Jozi there is no consistent and regular lesbian space. Most of the social spaces that operate daily in the city tend to be targeting the White gay male audience. There is a limited social space for lesbians that I could access such as the monthly 'Playground' party at *Capitol* in Rosebank, a northern suburb of the city. This space caters for an upmarket crowd and tends to be predominantly White. Other spaces that are more mixed demographically include pre-pride parties at *Horror Café* in Newtown, gay friendly pubs such as the lesbian owned *Brizz* in Orlando West, the older *White House* in Meadowlands and the recently launched *Academy Pub* in Diepkloof. However, while these spaces exist, they are laden with homophobic attacks such as the one leading to the death of two lesbians in July 2007. While these spaces exist, I was also mindful of the fact that there are many WLW who are not interested in the club/pub scene (particularly older women) and would rather socialise at each others' houses.

In selecting my informants, I was looking for Indian women who had lived in an Indian township at some point in their lives. This was not too difficult because I have ties to Indian areas but also because anyone over the age of 35 (and some younger) would have at some point in their lives in an Indian township. I was interested in exploring the link between race and space, particularly under Apartheid and how this affected(s) being an Indian WLW<sup>47</sup>. I was also interested in the factors that led to them leaving this space and choosing to outside of their areas.

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<sup>47</sup> See chapter two.

## **Going About My Business: Data Collection Processes**

For this study, I used different techniques including open-ended unstructured interviews as well as participant observation. I spent prolonged periods with the informants: visiting them at home, at work (where permitted), and in other spaces they visit. Many times I socialised with them and their friends and met their family members. By using this approach, I wanted to get a sense of their lives and engage with the informants in various aspects of their lives. Weekends were the most productive as there was more time to have an interview. Only one informant had more time during the week due to the nature of her work.

This particular approach, which incorporates notions such as shadowing, is called participant-observation. I will be using this approach to collect data for this research. The advantage of this method lies in the way it allows one to establish long-term relationships based on trust with the women concerned (Spradley, 1980). By following the informant in their environment, seeing them in their daily routine, I would be able to situate the person within their larger social network. In this way, I could also acquire further insight into how the network can provide opportunity to express one's sexual preferences. This method would allow me to see how an individual is able to create different networks of support often based on needs that surface in a person's life (Kohn, 1994). The network can thus become a measure of protection and support. In the case of same sex relations a network could facilitate meeting of lovers where being gay or lesbian is regarded as a taboo.

While interviews privilege the spoken word, participation observation in terms of fieldwork incorporates knowledge beyond the spoken word, the knowledge of everyday life as experienced by the body. By participating in the day-to-day activities of my informants I was able

to 'embrace the common place of everyday life' (Kohn, 1994). This puts 'flesh' on the skeletal descriptions of the past, as the 'seemingly banal' (Kohn, 1994) reveals much about the past and present of the informant.

### **Getting to Know Me – The Interview Process**

All interviews were tape-recorded. Each interview lasted a minimum of two hours. I asked my informants questions around how they created the space to be open about their sexualities, some biographical information and the context of their lives. I wanted to know who they are and what has gone on in their lives to date. I asked them to reflect on their sexual experiences with another girl. I wanted to know if they ever spoke to their loved ones about their sexuality and if they did how did they do so. I felt that initial sexual and intimate experiences and experiences of coming out (where applicable) framed how they viewed themselves and their sexualities.

The interviews took place in various spaces such as the workplace (where possible), at home or any other place where the informant felt comfortable. Sometimes, their lovers and friends would be around and would participate in the interviews. I enjoyed those moments as it facilitated the free flow of information. I was learning about them from people close to them. Further it also created an immediate check and balance where friends and partners could either add to or contest the bit of information of that moment. The interview process was a conversation and therefore it is important to bear in mind that this is one account of the process and not the 'final account of reality' (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994:18).

### **Deconstruction Of the Self**

The interview process afforded me a brief but intimate insight into their lives. In a separate and somewhat distant process I transcribed, coded and interpreted the texts. In these moments I analysed the texts to extract the themes that presented themselves with frequency, which I further scrutinised to see what internal logic would emerge. Such a breakdown of information would allow me to integrate the data with the theoretical framework, and also see how such data may present a challenge to existing frameworks (Huberman, 1988) (Fetterman, 1998) (Belgrave and Smith, 2002) In addition to this, discourse analysis may also suggest which themes should be given more exposure. For what may sound like a free conversation encompassing a myriad of themes may just allow us to move away from any preconceived ideas of how women who love women should behave.

As a researcher there were many ways in which I could interpret transcripts. 'Coming to conclusions' as Holland and Ramazanoglu, (1994:126) argue, 'is not just a process of following rules of method to the end point of a research project, but a very active and complex process of social construction' but also asking about conditions of validity and in what terms knowledge should be accepted?<sup>48</sup> I mulled over the 'themes' and issues that 'emerged' (or rather were invoked) from these three stories. I was representing a reality which was not my own yet, I was the main architect.

## **Reflections and Experiences on Fieldwork**

### **The Mutual Curiosity in the Interview Process**

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<sup>48</sup> Janet Holland and Caroline Ramazanoglu, 1994 "Coming to Conclusions: Power and Interpretation in Researching Young Women's Sexuality". P126



It is important for the researcher to find suitable informants. In my case I set up a meeting to interview them. How would they respond to research? Would they withhold information? Would they be willing to participate? Do they have stories to tell? I found that I was able to use mutual curiosity to my advantage, as I was interested in them, they too were interested in me. They wanted to know who I was and what I was about. Was I someone they would want to talk with about their same-sex sexuality? Why I am I interested in this particular topic? These were some of the questions I was asked directly or indirectly. In the time spent (and still spending) with Jameela, Preeti and Vaneshree my understanding of my personal sexuality has been unpacked, challenged and is continually being reworked. They wanted to know if they could trust me or if I was a voyeur. In our initial meetings we sized each other up. They wanted to know if I was serious about my research and I was.

In some instances I was interviewer and in others I was the interviewed. This was especially true in the early days of my relationships with each individual. In our first encounters I was tested or sussed out by each person, in their particular way. 'By treating interviews as social events, we are able to see them as a learning process for both the researcher and the informant.' (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994:127)

## **The Research Topic**

The story of Priya and Mimi mentioned earlier bears testimony to the sensitive nature of doing research on people's sexualities, particularly same-sexuality. Due to heteronormative and patriarchal conceptions of gender and sexuality, women who love women (WLW) publicly are likely to encounter hostility and violence in a society that seeks to control women's sexualities. In our society people are threatened by women who are sexual agents (by this I mean women

who feel entitled to and who claim their own sexual pleasure and sexuality). It is against this backdrop of what I call 'sexual-agent-phobia' that I focus on the lives of publicly visible WLW. I wanted to know how women who are socialised into occupying private spaces (e.g. household) were able to come out<sup>49</sup> and claim personal autonomy in public spaces.

### **The Use of Networks: Recruiting Informants**

Given the pressure that exists in society and especially in the Indian community to marry and procreate<sup>50</sup> I was interested in the personal processes that led to each woman publicly expressing their sexual identity. I looked for those social actors who were able to act as agents in their lives and change its course from the preordained path. This study does not view culture as being fixed and timeless, instead culture is viewed as a dynamic force, and these stories reveal how insider social actors rework and reframe norms such as heterosexual marriage and expected gender roles<sup>51</sup>.

From the experience of searching for Indian WLW to be a part of this study I learnt to discard assumptions. The people whom I thought would be hostile towards my research topic were to my surprise helpful in finding respondents. Although I was introduced to Preeti, Vaneshree and Jameela purely for the sake of research, friendships soon developed. This is because we were talking to and about similar (albeit not the same) experiences. We were women and lesbians together, we were people relating - but I was

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49 By this I mean that these women left their home space and community and came to a public space, as well as coming out of the closet and claiming one's sexuality

50 See Bhaskaran, S. 2004. *Made In India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects*

51 See Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The illusion of Destiny*, 2006 and Amin Maalouf, *On Identity*, 2000

also a researcher<sup>52</sup>. I would not have met them if it was not for my research. I asked them how they felt about me taking these moments that we share and turning it into a thesis. The common response was that they were not too perturbed by the interview process, adding that they did not always want to be 'under the microscope' as Jameela called it. As noted by Vaneshree and Fikile 'sometimes we must just be people together'.

I was allowed access into their lives because I was considered 'one of them' in anthropological terms I was an 'insider'. As noted by Kirtsoglou this insider knowledge can 'facilitate the establishment of higher levels of trust between researcher and social actors' (2004:13). Having mutual friends, being Indian and lesbian all seemed to work in my favour. Each person expressed interest in meeting me out of curiosity. They wanted to know who was asking these questions. Or they were doing their friend a favour. Because of our mutual friends none of the women greeted me with suspicion. According to Vaneshree she wanted to see who this 'other lesbian' was because she thought she was the only one. I had to straddle being with them as a friend, relaxing opening myself to them, while simultaneously having boundaries up as researcher.

## **The Writing Process**

Writing this thesis has taken me a very a long time because listening to my informant's stories allowed me to reflect and think about my story and my life. There was a strong level of identification between myself and my informants. I was forced to think about my own sexuality in a manner which I had not done before. I was also concerned about the academic stigma

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the experience of researching a group that you yourself are affiliated see Kirtsoglou, E. 2004, *For the Love of Women: Gender, Identity and Same-Sex Relations in a Greek Provincial Town*

associated with writing on same-sexuality (Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999). There is a legacy of viewing research on sexuality and particularly same-sexuality as not serious.

The process of writing is always a difficult one: I was writing the lives of people who could tell their own stories. By naming them and their desires I had fixed their identities for social analysis. A detailed story of each woman and their life's experiences deals with the tendency to speak of one experience as the universal experience. Even if naming is a contentious issue I believe that is important to document stories to challenge false notions such as 'there are no Indian lesbians'<sup>53</sup>.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **LIFESTORIES**

In the following section I will introduce the women and retell their stories. The excerpts are verbatim accounts of the transcripts. I have altered the texts slightly to enable ease of read by

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<sup>53</sup> I conducted a few impromptu discussions with about 10 people in my neighbourhood. I asked them if they knew and lesbians or women who were romantically/erotically involved with other women. The common response was that there are no lesbians in Lenasia and by extension there are no Indian lesbians.

removing repetition and words used for style rather than content. The extracts were selected according to the themes analysed and interpreted in chapter five. I decided to use the historical present as a way of telling the story in an attempt to convey the emotions at the time, so that one is able to get a sense of what each woman was going through at the time while they relived, retold and reconstructed past experiences. I shall give a brief account of each woman's context, followed by their stories.

### **Biographical Data**

Preeti is in her late 30's. She was born into a rich Gujarati, Hindu family in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal. Preeti's father had two wives, Radha and Rukmini. Preeti's volatile relationship with her father has impacted and informed her life's decisions. Her father was extremely abusive to both his wives and children. Currently Preeti lives with her lover Ula in Parkwood, Johannesburg. Interviews were done predominantly in her place of work, and we were able to do so because she is a dentist with her own private practice in Braamfontein.

Jameela is a successful lawyer in her forties. She lives in Sandton, an upmarket area in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Originally from Marabastad in Pretoria, she is the fifth of seven children. She grew up in a conservative Muslim home, but she does not practice any religion, although she does consider herself spiritual. Jameela is currently involved with Margriet, a psychologist. Margriet has two children from a previous marriage who live with her in her northern suburb home. Margriet was married for a long time before she came to the realisation that she was gay. I conducted interviews with both Margriet and Jameela at their homes respectively.

Vaneshree is in her thirties and lives with her lover Fikile on the East Rand. Vaneshree grew up in Natal, where she was adopted by a financially well-off Tamil speaking family. They followed the Hindu faith and were particularly attentive to traditions and culture. She is the only adopted child of her parents. She and Fikile got married recently as the Same-Sex Marriages Act now allows same-sex couples to marry. Vaneshree is a nurse who loves her job. She and Fikile travel a lot, mostly due to Fikile's work as LGBTQI activist.

In the following section their stories are retold from a first person historical present perspective.

This approach is best suited to her

## **Lives and Journeys Retold, Relived**

*Preeti*

I had an interesting first few years. We lived in a building (Shalimar flats) where everybody was familiar with one another and there was always lots of people around. My father had two wives. I had two biological brothers; one two years older than me and one two years younger than me and I had 3 (step) sisters and 2 (step) brothers. My mother, Rukmini was the second wife. My mother was always around. She stayed at home, meals were prepared etcetera, my father, however, was part-time there. My relationship with my step brothers and sisters was, you know, fine. There wasn't any separation, my father made sure that the kids from both sides of the family spent time together, however, our mothers were not friendly towards each other.

When I was about nine years old we moved from town to Overport. Growing up in Overport was, you know, fighting, and screaming and beating up and you know that type of thing. It was more difficult than in Shalimar, because you know whereas we had friends that we could run around and play with and all of that, there was no more of that here. It was just us in this house with this abusive man and all this ugliness. My mother got tired of the abuse and decided to move to Australia, where the rest of her family lived. My brothers went with her but I chose not to go. I continued living in Overport with my step mother, Radha. She was the most amazing woman. I never felt as though we were really step children.

I attended Durban Girls High, where I met Oshun. She was my best friend and my first girlfriend. We spent all our time together. One rainy day, when we were walking back from school, Oshun suddenly softly kissed me, and I, kissed her back. I didn't care if any one saw us. Kissing Oshun felt wonderful. From that day we started dating, we were in a relationship. It was in this relationship that I explored sex for the first time. We would have sleepovers at each other's houses. When people (family) would ask who she is I would say that she is just the school friend. No one said anything or suspected anything. Well maybe Apsara, my eldest sister knew,

but if she did, she didn't say anything. With Oshun it was nothing serious, I loved her but it was young love. I was still finding myself. Oshun became very needy and possessive. She wanted us to be together all the time and complained I was aloof. I was dealing with my own shit. Whenever I tried to leave her, she would threaten to kill herself or tell my father about our relationship. I loved her but it was just too much, and eventually I left. Oshun went to my father with our relationship. He didn't believe her. He thought we were having some fight and dismissed her accusations as childish.

In my matric year my step mother passed away. She died of an asthma attack. I was the only person that was there throughout the whole ordeal. It was a long drawn ordeal, having to watch someone gradually lose all the air that is available to breathe you know? And then just die. And I was by her side every single minute of that time. She was the most phenomenal woman I had ever met, and she was basically the cement that held everything. Things fell apart after that, after her dying. My father being the philanderer that he always was, within 3 months, came home with another woman. So my father comes home with this woman and decides to live with her there.

He was really spoilt. I mean he's one of those typical Indian men that would go to work with a picnic basket of hot food and roti. When my stepmother died, my elder sister Apsara and I had taken over the running of the household, because most of my siblings were overseas. We were saddled with having to attend to this man's needs, in terms of a hot meal to take to work and all of that. And also his new 20 odd year old Jewish girlfriend that couldn't do anything for herself, she was totally helpless beyond... and then we still had to go to university. Apsara was at tech at the time. That was a very difficult year. Shortly after my father moved in my youngest brother, Yatin, realised that it wasn't the type of life he could live. You know? we were never at home when he got home, we were at university, and he was tired of the violence. The last time



my father beat me up I was 21 years old and I thought I was going to die. At that point I only weighed 49kilos and he was an incredibly strong man, he was not big built but he was strong. Yatin said he was going to live with one of my uncles and he went. We continued this arrangement for awhile and then Apsara eventually got fed up with it, and she said to him, you know, you either get rid of this woman or set her up in a flat wherever you want, but we do not want her living with us. He thereafter decided that he'd rather be with Ann, and he left, he left us, alone there and he moved out, in this huge five bed roomed house the two of us. And I suppose it would have been very nice if we had you know. But it was just such a painful experience. I mean it was a couple of months after my stepmother had died. Neither of us wanted to be living there alone. So anyway, my father goes to live in another house of his, at the time one of my uncles (with his wife and three kids) was living there. It was a cramped situation. They (uncle and his family) decided they were going to move out, and come live with us because we were living in a five bed roomed house which was like you know, too much for two young girls.

I never quite got on with this uncle at all. You know, with my mother being the second wife and with my stepmother just being such an amazing woman everybody took to her. And they didn't quite like what my mother was doing, well she wasn't really doing anything, they didn't approve of the relationship, in their small minded way that sort of translated into well then the kids are bad. I never got on with my uncle and ja so it wasn't a very long time after that and a couple of bad experiences later, that I decided I wasn't going to live there any longer.

I think those were probably the hardest years of my life. The year at UDW was a complete mess. I failed hopelessly. I went to live with one of my sisters, Anu. The year after that I went to Unitra (University of Transkei) I passed everything because I think being away from home was just exactly what I needed. I applied for medicine and didn't get in. So I had to go back

to Durban. I was back at UDW and living with my uncle. I was pursuing a medical science degree to what end I had no idea but you know, I had to do something. Life was just so, so difficult you know?

Again I failed hopelessly at UDW, for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time. At this point my family was saying 'no no maybe you're not cut out to be studying anything' you know? 'Maybe you're a little bit too stupid, don't you think you should just rather be getting married or something?' I didn't quite agree with that. So I snuck off one day and I went to Medunsa and I enrolled there and that's when I started doing dentistry. This is when I had my first adult romantic relationship, with a very camp guy called Nirvan. I loved him but I wasn't in love. He helped me through difficult times but we fought a lot and the sex was bad. I never lusted after him. We fought<sup>54</sup> a lot. He clearly didn't want to be in the relationship and I was gay. I think me being with him was an attempt on my part to be doing the right thing, you know, being 'normal'.

I started thinking you know, maybe these people are right, maybe I really don't have as much brains as I think I do, because I failed again. There was no way I'm going to become a dentist or a doctor or anything for that matter. If you look at the rest of my family all of them are like either in the family business or they sitting at home you know. I ended my relationship with Nirvan which was also abusive and I decided I was going to finish this, and I finished my degree.

While I was finishing my degree I got involved with my friend Swastika. She was my best friend and I loved her intensely. She got me, we got each other. Swastika was and could still possibly be my soul mate. In this relationship I learnt how to love.

Swastika had huge issues with being 'gay'. I didn't really care, but she was worried about her family, she was worried about them finding out. Swastika came from a very conservative family. They had already mapped out her entire life for her, from start to finish. No one really

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<sup>54</sup> Physically and verbally

cared about the things I was doing so I was left alone by my family. They would hear stories about me drinking and smoking dagga on campus, and all my performances, but no one said anything to me. The relationship lasted for three years, till we finished our degrees. When we went back to our homes Swastika got married to a man.

I wanted to do my own thing I wanted to have my practice. I met Ella who lived in Joburg, in Rocky Street. She was older than me, and she was an out lesbian. We got involved and this made the move from Pretoria to Johannesburg easier<sup>55</sup>. My father was never happy with the fact that I was a dentist. When I said to him 'I finished I qualified I'm a dentist', you know? His 1<sup>st</sup> words to me were "that's, that's nice but the only reason you're a dentist is you're too stupid to be a medical doctor". When I bought my practice, I was on this mission, to prove to him that regardless of what he thought, I was going to be a success. In the 1<sup>st</sup> four years, the practice had reached its absolute ceiling. I came to the realisation that I didn't quite care what he thought anyway you know? Whether I was a success or not, I didn't need any affirmation from him. I started cutting back on my hours and started to just live my life. I mean I'm not doing dentistry for the love of it, I never wanted to be a dentist ever. I wanted to be an architect or an artist. My father just never approved of that at all. Eventually dentistry and more generally health care grew on me.

And here I am on the border of some very big changes, and that's all interlinked, it's my upbringing, it's my relationship with my stepmother, the fact that she died and I watched this happen, my father being so abusive and being so, vulgar about things in his expression of how disappointed he was that I wasn't a medical doctor and I just, then I reached a point where I thought you what fuck you, completely. You know, I don't speak to him much. But now when I'm in Durban, he comes to see me.

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<sup>55</sup> She and Swastika had been sharing a flat in Pretoria and commuting to Medunsa.

I never came out explicitly to those around me, but they knew. I came out to my mother. I called her in Australia and I said, 'ma I'm gay'. She said that she always knew. My father asked my sisters about my sexuality. My sisters knew. They knew without having to be told. And my father asked them about my sexuality through them. He considered it just a phase I was going through.

### ***Jameela***

I went to a school in Marabastad<sup>56</sup>, that's where I grew up Pretoria. I've been one of those fortunate ones, I think I always knew I was gay. Yet the thoughts always came first before the experience. And I think I only gave voice to it when I was about 13 for myself. I began exploring it in reading, trying to understand the morality of the feelings that I was experiencing. I became aware of how society actually works with its contradictions. Being acutely aware of gender relations by that age I worked out very early on, that what I was feeling was not mainstream, and was different. It was going to be frowned upon, and I would experience intolerance and possibly ostracisation if I expressed it. So a lot of the exploration and the thinking, and the trying to understand it, exploring what it this thing was, was done quietly and silently with books rather than with people.

And when I was 15 I got bold enough to court a girl (Fatima) at school. It was quite remarkable in that sense, that it was successful and it was a really loving and strong bond that developed. It was a non-sexual relationship, it was a physical relationship there was a lot of kissing and but it was a non sexual one. There was a strange respect for abstaining from sex because we were so young and you know not going that far. so this friend of mine, Rashaan, who

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<sup>56</sup> Because of Apartheid legislature, it would have been an Indian school.

was very much in love with her found out in about standard 9 and he stopped talking to me. And well the matric year was very interesting because the girls in the class had clearly taken a position and it was not a hostile position, in fact they were joking about it saying oh well who's going to be next on the list? that kind of thing. Boys were mixed about it. the reason that was the case was because, I was one of the brightest kids in the class and I had a very good peer relationship with everybody, and a lot of the time I spent helping everybody with their homework and forefront in a political and in a socio-political sense so the response I got was not one of hostility but rather one of well 'she's like that but we know her'. Rashaan called me some five years later to apologise for not continuing the friendship and to say that he missed me. And he just wanted to tell me that he's married and he's doing this and that. This was the first time that we actually spoke about that relationship, and I said to him sorry that you were so hurt but you didn't know that I was already involved with her and, if I could have told I would have but I couldn't. That was a very touching and compassionate interaction.

In matric our relationship, my relationship with her (Fatima) ended because she wanted to be married and have children and, actually we couldn't didn't really talk about it. I think the enormity of this of this thing hit us but badly, in the sense that we couldn't even talk about what we were going to do. Would we even think about planning a future together? It was like a given, there is just no future. She got married had a child and got divorced and before I ran away to go and study we met up again and that was the time when we did have sex. Because the attraction between us was still very strong and present. And in that conversation she was saying that I abandoned her and that I didn't I didn't voice the need to have a future with her and I said to her I couldn't see how that could be possible in the context that we were living in. I needed to be financially independent in order to make decisions for myself in the first instance, and in the second instance there was a lot of other things I wanted to do in my life apart from settling

down with one person, that wasn't the primary thing that I wanted. But had I known that, what was expected of me I would have, offered to stay around despite the other things that I had wanted to pursue.

She then went on to get married and remarried. I saw her on and off over the next two decades, and at some point she said she didn't want to see me anymore. Because every time she saw me it disturbed her life too much because she still wanted to be with me. But she wouldn't have been able to live that life. So as far when did I know about my sexuality I knew very early on, as far as did I explore other avenues and try and change myself, yes I did. But for me there were so many other gender related constraints that that I needed to challenge, and turn around for myself personally, sexuality was just one of it.

I grew up in the context where it wasn't given that you were going to go and study. And you had to fight for being different not just on a level of sexuality but also if you wanted to study as a woman and not follow the path that had been predetermined for you as in marriage and children. And, I tried to work out how I was going to do this. I wanted to go and study and had been accepted by almost every university in the country my father refused to sign any forms, ofcourse I got accepted by forging his signature but there was a basic position, that you're not going to go and study you are going to get married and that's your future. So I worked out that maybe a way to freedom was marriage. I could get married and then get divorced because divorced women enjoy a status and a lot more freedom in society than unmarried women.

I then agreed to get engaged to a guy who was a friend of a family, our families were friends, and in 3 months time I was completely unable to do this thing. I tried everything in my power to destroy the relationship hoping that he would break it off with me but he wasn't doing that. And eventually I had to grasp the matter and I said to myself "I'm not gonna do this". My parents were obviously very upset and it was the first time in their experience that a child was

rebellious against something so serious and the shame of it. In those days a broken engagement was like a death sentence. But my sisters were very good about persuading my parents.

It was late seventies. The issue around wanting to breaking out of that community and that way of life was not only about sexuality, it was about politics, it was about values, it was about wanting to be an academic, wanting to pursue academic interests, wanting different things for myself. So sexuality was part of it but in fact one of the bigger and more burning desires and ambition was to go and study and obtain a qualification that would enable me to become financially independent. From a very early age I realised that financial independence was critical to any women who wanted to live an independent life, and have some negotiating power. So I ran away from home in 1981, and I ran away to go and study not to pursue a girlfriend.

My father didn't speak to me for three years after I did that. They had to deal with the community saying what is this you know? Why is your daughter gone off? And they said no, we sent her. So they rescued themselves in a social sense from scandal by taking this half responsibility for it, but my father and myself didn't speak and we had an extremely rocky relationship for 3 to 4 yrs after that. I used to come home for holidays and it was always a very traumatic time for everybody, because I always negotiated and spoke to my father through everybody, and he spoke to me through everybody, so there was a lot of anger and not understanding of what this was about, why is my child doing this you know? I had a lot of buffers because my sisters were very good at mediating this tension between me and my parents. In many ways I was living the dream of almost all my sisters who did not have the opportunity to do what I was doing. So I had immense support from them, because this was exactly what they wanted to do, coz they were all ahead of their time. Three of them got

married by arranged marriages and they were traumatised by it, so they were there as a strong support network.

So I ran away to go and study I went to Cape Town. I was at UCT. At UCT my main aim was really to also aside from my sexuality I really wanted to explore my political commitments and my political consciousness. I felt a strong overwhelming need to be involved in a movement that would that would be a movement that made me understand and feel patriotic towards this country. I wanted to be part of something that was going to allow me to challenge what we were experiencing as kids when we were growing up and the injustices, and not just the injustices that were directed towards me, but the injustices that were in society at large. I was looking for political involvement rather than exploring sexuality. And I found it very quickly. I found it in the student's movement, I found it in the UDF movement, touching shoulders with the ANC underground.

In that process I got involved with a woman who was probably my 1<sup>st</sup> significant relationship as an adult and we were both activists. It was a very strong bond that surpassed sexuality, it was about our vision for the future, our understanding of the political environment we were in and what we were doing about it and our commitment to the struggle. It was a very complicated relationship because it had so many bonds on so many different levels, and she was straight. And in that relationship she couldn't deal with it, as much as she loved me she was always trying to get out of it. So she got involved with men twice in our relationship which I think shook it and eventually I left her. But the break up was longer than the relationship itself, we were closely (intensely) involved with each other positively and negatively for seven years.

We friends now, the bond is still present. After I broke up with her by then I had completed my degree. I was burnt out as an activist but I wanted to teach. I was teaching maths at a high school in Cape Town. I realised I never really explored being young. I grew up in a



conservative conventional family, I didn't rebel around smoking and drinking and things. I only did that when I was in my 20s I had a sense of some clubbing but I never did all those things. I never did all those things other teenagers did in that time. So in the time I was on rebound trying to find what it was I wanted to do as a career because that was still very more important to me than anything else. I allowed myself to explore other women and you know the fun side of life. Instead of working flat out as an activist, meetings, every night, discussions, workshops, organising and mobilising. I started just going out with friends to movies and clubs and things. During that time I opened myself to other women and I had some meaningful relationships but they were very short lived because I just couldn't commit to them or I was too scared, I just couldn't do it. I went back to study and I went to do my LLB which is what I really wanted to do, I wanted to be a lawyer. And, that took me to the end of my stay in Cape Town which was 11yrs.

Now how did I see myself then? I think I definitely saw myself as gay there's no question about that. Though there was a question of what kind of gay person I would be. Was I closeted? Well I wasn't closeted with my friends but I never said it. And no one asked. We were activists together and no one really tackled the sexuality issue. There was a group of activists that had setup a gay and lesbian organisation called OLGA, the organisation for lesbian and gay activists. And OLGA was the precursor of the group of people who were mainstream activists, because with the activist sphere, there were different levels, mainstream and fringe. Gays were always, if they were mainstream activists their sexuality was never discussed and in fact it was seen as a weakness. Because in those days you could get blackmailed by the security police for being gay, they in fact used that tactic with quite a few people in order to get them to become spies because of their sexuality. So it was always something that was very difficult to discuss and there were many reactionary positions taken on it, so in a strange way in the most progressive environment people were closeted you know? Which was the most interesting contradiction we

lived in.

There wasn't a space, which allowed me to be an activist and gay at the same time. You know I was most despondent about that issue and I would test my own sexuality. And I'd say oh well here's a man that's interested in me let me see if that works. and you know the test really is when you in bed, because when you expect this woman body and there's a man body, and this is like no I want something else, and you try and you try, for me it was a very clear I want to be somewhere else. I'm sorry but I keep on wishing you were a woman and you not, and as much as I like the guy it just wouldn't go away. So I tested it. Can I accept that I'm different and continue to live with my difference? Which I accepted a long time ago, but how can I bear this difference in life, can I continue doing this? Can I assimilate into mainstream? So I would test it and I think the guys were very hurt and very offended and very upset because. It wasn't a test to deny my sexuality, it was a test to affirm it. Where you come out of it saying well I'm still gay, I still want to be gay and I have to accept that I am. I've been like that forever and I must accept what I am. It's not like I haven't been sexually attracted to men, but those have been very few and far between and they've always been a very sort of fleeting sort of attraction based on a combination a number of things, intellectual, it was always nice people, very nice descent people. But it was always, I wish I could be straight but I'm not.

Gradually I allowed myself to assert my sexuality, without apologising for it. The people that I worked very closely with began to understand that I was gay. I didn't have to tell them. So did I see myself as gay? Yes. But I also saw myself as more than that. And a lot of the women I was involved were women who had been involved with men before, who had got involved with other women after me, but also got with other men. So they were not overtly gay and decidedly gay. Most of them occupied that grey area of sexuality and it may be because the grey area is about

more than just sexuality. It's about, how exciting and how interesting you find someone how much you can engage intellectually with them. And those were the key drivers of affection.

The ANC was unbanned in 1990 and I was having an ideological battle about whether I wanted to be an ANC member; whether I wanted to be a career politician or whether I wanted to continue being an activist for social justice. I decided I wanted to be an activist and not a career politician. I moved up to Joburg. I found it a hard adjustment because it was closer to the family and it did impact on how I was going to engage with my sexuality then because being further away from home is always easier you know, on that front. Was I going to come out to my parents? No I was not going to come out to my parents, but my father died in 1991 and in some ways it actually liberated our family, the women, in ways that were quite positive. So I've never come out to my family but my family knows, and I know that they know on a number of levels the way my mother deals with me.

We get together at my mother's house every weekend. My family is a very gentle family, they're very inclusive and very polite and everybody who you bring home is included and welcomed home. There is no issue about you can't bring someone home and my mother would never say anything until after the person disappears and then she would say 'so where is so and so'. I would say no they're around, she would say 'you know I didn't like that about her' and so she delivers comment on the relationship without saying I know you're involved with someone. The reason why I know that she knows, that it is a relationship, is because she tells her other daughters oh Jameela is seeing this person now and so on. But she would never discuss it directly with me.

We never speak about it; it's just comfortably worked into space. So we live parallel universes but at the same time we transcend those, we seek out the bonds with one another and we don't let the differences interfere with it.

So there's a degree of being out in my family. My brother is also gay so it's clear there are no issues there. My younger sister Tahirih has no issues, we speak openly and frankly. My older sister knows and she tries to engage with me to see if I will speak to her about it. Most of the time I choose not to but the context is there for me to say I'm seeing so and so. But because I don't say, the way they deal with it is then they include the person, and they wait until I'm ready, and if it works it works out, and if doesn't work out it doesn't work out, and that's how they deal with it. What my family does know is that my sexuality is not the primary driver for me in terms of motivation around what I do. My career has always taken 90% of my life and that the other pursuits that I follow which are far more important to me. My other sisters are aware that I'm different and how they've dealt with it is they give me a lot of privacy. Like most families you know when your sister wants to come around they knock on the door and pop in and stuff like that, they would call me to say 'can we come around' so they have adjusted to my lifestyle rather than me having to fight with them about it. So in a sense I'm very lucky in many ways. Because the level of power and financial independence I've achieved, because I became a lawyer and by all objective accounts, have been a successful lawyer, I always occupied the mainstream positions of economic activity.

I became Tahirih's political mentor. She became a youth activist. She chose to live her life along the lines that I was. But the interesting thing was, when she finished matric it was understood that she was going to go to varsity, and that was a huge change already. it was given that she was going to go. Well my father bitched about finances and things like, which is typical, but there was no question about the fact that she was going to acquire a tertiary education. Which was a battle that had been won. In the community I was one of the few people who took that step. And what followed was a whole lot of girls saying we want to do this as well, and parents started

compromising, saying ok you'll do it closer to home. you saw the Indian community in Laudium starting to open itself up, realising we need to acquire skills which are not just general dealer skills, and girls then became far more valuable in that sense for families. So in another way it was quite pioneering but it was hell and it was difficult in that there was a time when I could not see what the outcome could be, but I was determined to live my life the way that I wanted to live it. And If I had to sacrifice my family bonds then so be it. So I was quite out there remote for a while in a space that felt dislodged and rudderless in one way, but in another way was quite exhilarating because I was learning about my own strengths and my own realities. When I was seventeen I felt that, if I had lived there, I would have gone from one tunnel to another tunnel without ever seeing the sunlight. And that I wanted to see the sunlight and I wanted to live it. And it was going to be of my making and not of anybody else's. It's only later on that I started appreciating my upbringing and the value system that the family had provided me. And the way my family had dealt with that issue with understanding, very compassionate, keeping the channels of communication open even if it was through my mother or through my sisters. There's always an open door it's never closed. That sets them apart from other families. Because I know of people, whose mothers have just, and fathers have ostracised their children and never spoken to them even on their death bed. So I think it wasn't just sexuality, because in fact it wasn't sexuality that was driving me, it was other things. Mainstream community and mainstream society could relate to my struggles. She wants to study, nobody said she wants to be gay you know. I would have stopped being gay if I had gotten to study you know. Theoretically speaking, I will never have stopped.

I would call myself a lesbian only if you pushed me to describe myself in terms of sexuality. But if you ask me to describe myself to you it wouldn't be the 1<sup>st</sup> thing. I don't sleep with men I sleep with women. And I enjoy my relationships with women and I feel closer to

women. But if you want to describe me beyond that. I don't see my sexuality as overwhelmingly describing me. I'm a progressive activist who's dedicated to transformation who believes in tolerance and debate and I think that, and I have a personal value system that lives along the lines of the 10 commandments except for the fact that I'll certainly not get married to anybody. Marriage is an institution I don't believe in, commitment I do.

I don't wear my sexuality on my sleeve because I think that primarily it is a private choice, with social consequences, which I will fight for. I have put my time and energy into fighting for rights for people like myself and people who choose to be gay, and who can't be anything but gay or who are Black or who are foreign, because of xenophobia. I'm an internationalist at heart I understand that culture is not something that develops in a lab in a conical flask. By in large communities that have interacted with other communities cannot talk about a pure culture. So what is Indian for example? I've struggled a lot with Indian identity and South African identity when I was young and I wanted to be South African Black with an Indian ancestry. And I understood that when I was 7yrs old. I look for similarities, I look to see where is it I can relate to someone on similar grounds. Once I have done that then we can tolerate our differences. So I've dealt with my sexuality in the same way. I engage with people, they like me, and then they can't hate me after that when they discover that I'm gay. Because you see there's so much other stuff that we can talk about, and we can connect on.

Yes I would describe myself as a lesbian if you asked me, and what does it mean for me? It means that, that if you want to distinguish me on the basis of sexuality then I sleep with women, I love women, and I don't want to sleep with men because I've tested my own sexuality on a number of occasions. But if you want to describe me as a holistic person my lesbianism is a part of me.

## ***Vaneshree***

I'm formerly from Durban. We lived in Chatsworth, and we had a house on the beach in Umhlanga. Then when Umhlanga became a developmental area my father saw it as a good time to sell the house. My father was in real estate. He kept on building houses and buying and houses and selling them. My parents were living with my father's parents, and you know the dynamics of the Indian family when you live with your mother-in-law and father-in-law. My parents decided to move out on their own. I never had a stable community if you're looking at a specific area. I could say I lived in Chatsworth, I lived in Phoenix, and Umhlanga the rest of them were just real estate. My father would buy then sell a couple of months later, we basically had to move wherever my father moved. I told you I grew up in a very conservative family. A family that believed in tradition and culture. If there was a prayer I would be part of it and it always included the entire family. We had family tradition, the spirit of tradition.

I think my father had a greater influence in my life than my mother. My mother wasn't the emotional type, she was more for her family, her people. I finished matric with straight A's. My father wanted me to study medicine or law because he had businesses, he wanted a lawyer in the family. I refused I wanted to study something totally different. I saw myself as a people person and decided to pursue a career in nursing. I relocated to Johannesburg, where I lived at a residence in town. During this time I was involved with a man. I loved him but I was not in love with him. We got engaged. I lost this fiancé in a car crash. If I had married him I don't think I would have been happy. I would have been happy for some time until I realised this is not what I'm looking for. If I was eighteen and someone gave me the option to explore other relationships, like homosexual relationships, I think I would have gone far differently.

From there I had another boyfriend but somehow nothing clicked right with this boyfriend. This relationship didn't work. So I decided to go solo. You know, I looked at it as a man it was one of those things, maybe I wasn't interested in a relationship. But I think the emphasis would be on, that I was not interested in a relationship with a man.

I was single for a year, the most of 1998. In 1999 I met a woman. We had a lot in common in terms of health, she was driving an ambulance. She was not a woman of my own race group. She asked me for my telephone number and I was very interested, actually, I thought she was a guy, that's my honest first impression of her, I thought she was a guy. So I thought ok here's a guy who wants my telephone number, now not to be sounding vain, but I was at that time an eye catching specimen let's put it that way. People were interested you know? People wanted to be there. But I was not interested you know? She used to call me and things like that and then we started developing a friendship. And I realised something in that friendship process. I'm not who I'm made out to be, made out by culture, tradition and whatever. And I knew in my heart that I was going to break all those barriers by doing what I was going to do. And not sure of myself but still sure of myself, I decided to pursue this relationship. Well she basically pursued me all the way and then eventually we got involved in a relationship.

To be honest with you I even didn't know how to kiss a girl for the first time, what happens, you know? And it felt right, it felt normal. Emotions had place, you know? It wasn't this scattered thing that was flying around somewhere in the air, you know? It suddenly found a tree and it landed and here I settled you know? And that's basically what happened.

But I think that the stumbling block I hit was that I couldn't openly say that I'm a lesbian. I couldn't openly say that I was involved with a woman so in terms of disguise my family still believed I had a boy friend. I had a partner, yes of course, there was this person that was



phoning me there was this person that sent me messages when they came over they would find teddy bears in my room. I wouldn't be buying them for myself, you know, and they'd find love bites on my neck for example and that couldn't happen on its own, you know?

In terms of tradition I agreed to be her partner for life but unfortunately the sad thing about it was that she cheated on me five times over, and I ended up saying to myself, no I don't want this relationship or whatever and maybe I'd made a mistake maybe I wasn't lesbian after all, you know maybe it was just me exploring or looking for attention or, or I was looking for a mother figure because I didn't have a mother figure in my life, or maybe this was God testing me you know, testing how strong I was, and here I was I broke all the norms of tradition and culture. I sat down and analysed that for the long time. I think what happened from there is that I went into introspection. I still couldn't find or define my space. I think I was bound by culture and tradition. I turned to my culture but I also felt restricted by it. My gran and father passed within a short space of time, I fasted did prayers, I found myself doing those cultural practices the things that I would normally do as a child in home where a parent has died or a gran has died whatever.

My partner was there but she was 'my friend' you know? I wasn't able to say that she was my girlfriend. Then I got sick. I've been living with cancer from 1998, that's another issue in my life. My partner was there with me for chemotherapy and all the likes. I decided that I'd rather live for myself. My partner had cheated on me and I felt like it [the relationship] wasn't enough. Maybe it was the cancer; I started questioning all these things. I started questioning the books, I graduated from spiritual school so I was well versed in terms of the Bhagavad-Gita, Mahabharata, Ramayana and all those things. In the process I realised that all these books were written in a time when a person couldn't express who her or his self was. These books have

made us who we are, I come from a practice, but these traditions have been passed on from a person.

Let me tell you a story my spiritual mentor told me. One day there was a prayer that was going on, I think it was a Porridge prayer or something. It was at one of the priest's houses né? The priest had this cat that was constantly disturbing the processes, every time he would lay out a dish the cat would get there, annoyed he tied the cat in a bag and hung it on a tree so the cat does not move, you understand? The congregation who was there observed all of this and when they went home to do the prayer each one of them got a cat tied it in a bag and put it in a tree because they thought it was part of the prayer. Now you tell me what is tradition?

The honest truth about it all is that I don't think coming out is that easy in the Indian community. When Fikile told me "there's another lesbian Indian out there" I said 'No! You're joking, You are joking' [laughter] I thought I was standing solo in the world' and where to from here? How do I go forward? How do I continue being who I am? Because that's basically who we are, we are culture and tradition. As Indians we have changed from our ancestors, so I think 'coming out' is not as difficult as it would seem ne? Indians are quite adaptive, I mean if our ancestors can come from India work in the sugar cane fields when they have never seen sugar cane in their lives, they've never tasted sugar cane in their lives and here they come and they sit in the sugar cane fields and they believe sugar cane is sweet and this is what they must do. Now you tell me, can they not change? I believe we are adaptive, we can change.

Then I met Fikile and we hooked up. We started staying together fairly soon, things were accelerated. I was staying with my ex lover, Kim in her parents' house. Fikile was having problems where she was staying so she came to stay with me. We were asked to leave by Kim's father, Uncle Jack. Actually he wrote to us. One day while Fikile and I were making love Uncle Jack slipped a note under our door. Saying that he didn't know we were lesbians and he didn't

approve of that kind of lifestyle in his house, especially because there were children around. What you think of that? I wonder what he thought me and his daughter used to do behind those doors. We stayed with a few friends for a while and eventually we got a place of our own. In terms of my identity by then it felt so natural to be with a women that I didn't even question it. After all my reflection I realised I that this is who I am. And I think my happiness matters. when you go out there today and find a guy for yourself I don't say anything, I don't ask 'Why does he have this colour hair? Why does he wear these earrings? Why does he dress like this?' you know, I don't do that I accept him for who he is, your family will accept you for who he is. So why not accept me for who I am?

I had an accident: I broke my back and had to go for a back operation. I was off work for about two months, we phoned my mother so she came up to look after me. My mother was confused by our relationship. She was very conservative and she could not understand how I was able to have such a close friendship with a Black woman. She knew I had a friend called Fikile but she wanted to know why are Fikile's clothes packed in the same wardrobe as mine? Why was she wearing my jacket? Why was she wearing my shoes? Why were we drinking out of the same cups? Why were we eating out of the same plates? Why do we feed each other? You know, why all these things, she wanted to know why and I didn't have an answer. I said ma it's just part of the friendship, it's the convenience of friendship. The friendship was too intimate for my mother and my excuses did little to placate her, my mother was really getting curious. The deceit was also taking its toll on our relationship, because Fikile is very upfront about her sexuality. She found it difficult to keep up the façade. Feeling the pressure I decided to tell my mother.

I called my mother to the room, and Fikile was there and I said: 'Ma, I have something to tell you'. She said 'what is it?' I said 'Fikile is not my friend.' I looked at her. 'What?' she said. I said 'Fikile is my girlfriend' now my mother being the kind of person that she is, she said 'Ja,

she's your girl and she's your friend.' you know? I say 'Ma she's my girlfriend as if I had a boyfriend, I am gay.' So my mother had heard these things about people being gay before, but my mother didn't call it gay my mother called it 'gail'. She says 'you can't tell me that you are gail you bloody talking nonsense, don't talk rubbish' my mother went on. I was like 'Ma, I want you to understand I'm in love with Fikile as I would love a man'. My mother got up and left the room. She was pissed off and she started crying. Then she went to watch TV, she was angry and she didn't talk to us the whole night. She didn't want to have anything to do with us. The next morning she woke up and she wasn't my mother anymore, she was something out of a horror movie. She became really nasty started taking off with me using every vulgarity known. She was not accepting and I entitled her to her anger. I have a supportive partner she said to me 'you know what, let it go and then we will see what happens, you know let her get over her anger' and I think Fikile really helped me through that process. She doesn't accept Fikile as who she is and I doubt she ever will. She has mellowed a bit but she never got over that fact. If my mother had her way she would stay with relatives when she came to Jozi. She did it once, just after I came out. She went to stay with Maliga, an aunty of mine. Maliga asked her why she wasn't staying with me and if everything was ok. My mother didn't want the rest of the family to know that I'm gay so she made an excuse to avoid the family from talking. Worried about what people might say, on her next visit to Jozi, she stayed with us.

My mother had to engage with the reality of sexual orientation on another occasion, when I appeared on the show called the *Big Question*. I phoned to tell her that I would be on TV and she must watch. I think what happened to her that day was that the reality hit home, that I am with Fikile, and that people have seen us in public, now it's too late to go back, you know? I think my mother's issues are multiple issues, it's about the fact that Fikile's Black and the fact that I'm lesbian, the fact that I'm in love with a woman. I think it's just too much for her to deal

with, you know? , and my mother has always spoken to me about grand children and things like that.

As for how I call myself, when we were defined we were defined as homosexuals. By defect they call it homosexuals and then they called the men gay and they called the women lesbian. The term queer and the likes come from a community perspective. If you look at the definition of queer it means something that is not understandable, if it's something that is not understandable, ne? It's our duty to make them understand. I'm not queer you can use the terminology of course that suits you, but I prefer the term lesbian. Ne? I'm a lesbian. Right, my definition is that I'm a woman who loves another woman, right, if that is the case and you want to call me queer its fine because it suits you but my understanding of myself is that I'm not queer. I'd gladly tell anybody I'm lesbian.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Deconstruction**

#### ***THE FIRST TIME***

This chapter will examine the politics of same-sex desire among WLW. When did Jameela, Preeti and Vaneshree, who grew up in a heteronormative environment, realise they preferred women to men, or maybe both? When and how did they translate this knowledge into actions? In other words, I considered it important to learn about their first same-sex experiences as this in many

ways signalled a shift away from accepted norms. By collecting their stories, we open a window to a different struggle. Their stories are an example of individual strength, a personal struggle and a deep-rooted human need to seek and to live according to one's true desire. By grounding what would be the lived experience of sexuality in the tangible realities of the everyday negotiations we get a sense of the complexities and social forces faced by each individual. Considering how uninviting their worlds are to this form of love how did they find spaces to be with their loves? What were the issues that presented themselves once they acted on this love? How did they feel about their love? These are some of the questions that the following chapter will ask.

Heterosexuality is the normative, compulsory sexuality. After their first sexual desires for another woman they become aware of a different mode of sexual being, and in turn of their own sexual 'difference' and sexual agency. As noted by Jameela, when you say 'yes' to one instance, in effect you say 'yes' to all instances thereafter – you have opened the flood gates to experience life and its vast possibilities.

In this light their first sexual desires are viewed as the precursor for further same-sexual exploration as well as setting the scene for the possibility of coming out as lesbian, gay or homosexual. The first time can mean a paradigm shift, a self-realisation, a difference declared and called into question. Through these stories we get insight into the individual's personal process of finding love and experiencing heartbreak, which are indeed very human phenomena, against the backdrop of cultural, economic and political constraints.

What impact did kissing another woman have on our three informants? How did it influence their sexual identities? And how did they cope with such self-discovery? To gain insight

into certain intimate aspects of personhood, an analysis of themes presented in each woman's stories will follow.

### ***Jameela's First Time***

I've been one of those fortunate ones, I think I always knew I was gay. Yet the thoughts always came first before the experience. And I think I only gave voice to it when I was about 13 for myself. I began exploring it in reading, trying to understand the morality of the feelings that I was experiencing. I became aware of how society actually works with its contradictions. Being acutely aware of gender relations by that age I worked out very early on, that what I was feeling was not mainstream, and was different. It was going to be frowned upon, and I would experience intolerance and possibly ostracisation if I expressed it. So a lot of the exploration and the thinking, and the trying to understand it, exploring what it this thing was, was done quietly and silently with books rather than with people.

In retrospect Jameela feels fortunate that she was able to prepare herself early on to live with her sexual difference, because as a young teenager she is aware of her 'sexual difference'. As a result of witnessing fixed gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality as a young girl she is aware of her place in the gender hierarchy. As a girl, Jameela is expected to spend her days indoors and domesticate herself. Notions of being 'good' and 'bad' for the female body are tied to space and movement. A good girl stays inside, and a bad girl roams the streets. These notions of good and bad are also intrinsically tied to the policing of young women's sexualities. The outside public space is male dominated, therefore women who venture outside open themselves to male penetration, literally (in terms of wanted and unwanted sexual encounters

with men) and symbolically as their conduct will be judged by 'the community' (i.e. the omnipotent male father figure) as inappropriate and unbecoming of a young woman. It is clear that for a young girl to remain pure, she must abstain from premarital sex, she must stay inside away from boys and political engagement, and she must domesticate herself.

Jameela thinks about the implications of her desires in relation to her family and community. She thinks about the meaning of wanting a woman in this world, a homophobic world. Knowing that her desires challenge normative sexuality, Jameela did her initial exploration with books rather than with people. It was safer to explore her sexuality in this manner as it afforded her the much needed space, albeit surreptitiously, to make sense of her desires. The only sexual union presented is the heterosexual<sup>57</sup> marriage model. Besides this particular model, alternative forms of love/sex/life are not presented as a visible, viable arrangement<sup>58</sup>. Jameela feels at odds with her sexual desires because it clear to her that in the society we live in a certain *kind* person likes someone of the same-sex, and by most accounts it is the 'deviant' kind<sup>59</sup>. Growing up she heard people talk and saw their reactions to those in the community who chose gender roles outside of prescribed models<sup>60</sup>.

Jameela's anxieties around her same-sex desires illustrate the hegemony that heterosexuality enjoys. It is only because she desires something outside of the heterosexual model that she has to deal with issues of morality. At the age of fifteen, two years after she comes out to herself, Jameela feels confident enough to pursue a girl.

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57 Preferably the middle class, same 'race, not to big of an age gap and vanilla sexing kind

58 See Adrienne Rich, 1980, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, for a discussion on heteronormativity.

59 Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1; An Introduction*, 1976, translated from the French by Alan Sheridan-Smith. Penguin Publications as well as Zackie Achmat, Apostles of the un-civilised vice

60 Effeminate men were often the butt of many jokes and called *pottai marie* which is a derogatory Tamil word for gay men.



And when I was 15 I got bold enough to court a girl (Fatima) at school. It was quite remarkable in that sense, that it was successful and it was a really loving and strong bond that developed.

Jameela is surprised that her feelings are reciprocated. Until then she had felt alone in her same-sex desires, now someone that she desires shares her feelings. Jameela and Fatima decide that it would be in their best interests if they kept their relationship a secret. According to Srivastava (2003: 2) 'different sites of secrecy can tell us something about the relationships of material and cultural power that need to be addressed in our projects of social change.'<sup>61</sup>. Rather than disrupt the system Jameela and Fatima mobilised silence to maintain the status quo, this was their survival tactic. Being young dependents they wielded neither the cultural nor material power to be able to claim their love publicly so they use silence to ensure that 'life as we know it' continues to exist. Jameela and Fatima did not have the support that would enable them to challenge societal precepts, especially an entrenched institution such as heterosexuality.

While their peers are able to confide in each other and express solidarity to each other's early sexual causes, Fatima and Jameela felt unable to share their love with anyone. Even though Jameela shared everything with her best friend Rashaan, she is unable to tell him about her relationship with Fatima. As noted by Bhattacharyya (2002) 'heterosexuality marks all unmarked places as its own'<sup>62</sup>. Their secrecy is what protected their relationship, in that it afforded them the space to explore their desires. They were able to present their relationship as a friendship and were therefore afforded unlimited time together, this would have not been the case if they

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61 Srivastava, S. 2003, 3<sup>rd</sup> IASSC conference held in Johannesburg, Plenary address, *Complicating 'sexuality', contesting 'secrecy'*, p2.

62 Bhattacharyya, Gargi, *Sexuality and Society : an introduction*. 2002. London : Routledge.

were a heterosexual couple. Preeti who also had her first sexual experience with a girl in her adolescent years employed similar tactics.

A family's respectability, reputation and honour is placed squarely on the shoulders of their girl child (Bhaskaran, 2004). Her 'purity' is ensured by her virginity, she must remain untarnished by premarital sexual activity. Her sexuality is the concern of the entire family, as a result the movement of single females is closely monitored and usually restricted to the private domain of the household. The fact that attraction is based on opposites in our society worked to their advantage as they were able to conduct their relationship with some ease, a luxury not afford to their heterosexual peers. Besides external pressures to conform, the girls themselves were unsure about their desires. All of these factors contributed to the couple choosing to explore their relationship privately and silently indoors. Silence afforded them protection but also limited the possibilities of the relationship.

If we ascribe to the notion of sexuality as 'one nodal point in a network, rather than a discrete object of scrutiny'<sup>63</sup>, it becomes clear that sexuality is about far more than just the sexual act, sexuality is tied to social status, morality, religiosity, identity, community and various other context specific social institutions<sup>64</sup>. In this context sexuality and more specifically 'compulsory heterosexuality'<sup>65</sup> is tied to cultural notions of honour, family respectability and gender performance.

At the end of matric their relationship ends. There was mutual disappointment as neither party was able to articulate their needs. They couldn't talk about their future together, it

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<sup>63</sup> Bhattacharyya, G. 2002, *Sexuality and society: an introduction*. p21. London : Routledge

<sup>64</sup> As noted by Edward Brenner in *The Anthropology of Experience* 'meaning is present in the here and now'. By noting that meaning is context specific we are able to become aware of 'cultural particularities' rather than forcing homogenous readings on people and society. Also see Srivastava Srivastava, S. 2003, 3<sup>rd</sup> IASSC conference held in Johannesburg, Plenary address, *Complicating 'sexuality', contesting 'secrecy'*

<sup>65</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality", in *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, 1993, ed Abelove, H, Barale, M, A. & Halperin, D, M.

was a given, there was no future. Their relationship ends because their love is considered subversive not because they are no longer attracted to each other. The night before Jameela leaves for Cape Town they have sex for the first time signalling the existing emotional and physical attraction. That night is the first time they talk about their relationship.

In that conversation she was saying that I abandoned her and that I didn't I didn't voice the need to have a future with her and I said to her I couldn't see how that could be possible in the context that we were living in. I needed to be financially independent in order to make decisions for myself in the first instance, and in the second instance there was a lot of other things I wanted to do in my life apart from settling down with one person, that wasn't the primary thing that I wanted. But if I'd known that that was what was expected of me I would have, offered to stay around despite the other things that I had wanted to pursue.

Speaking about their relationship meant they would have to name their desires. As noted by Audre Lorde (1980: 42) 'the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.'<sup>66</sup> Rather than vocalise their love they choose silence because it seems like the safer option. They feared exposure for being themselves, for being different, and for being WLW.

They had not cultivated a space for open communication in their relationship. Silence had created a protective bubble of around their love. The couple had never seen any examples of their relationship, they had no idea how to sustain a relationship like theirs given that it transgressed such fundamental social mores. If talking is a form of validation then the 'not-saying' resulted in their mutual disappointment. Jameela and Fatima were used to mobilising

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66 Audre, Lorde. 1980. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" in *Sister Outsider*. P42.

silence for their protection; they had kept their love a secret for so long that now they themselves were unable to talk about their relationship.

The silence that had protected their love from outside intrusion, also served to smother hopes of being a 'real couple'. According to Jameela if they had been a heterosexual couple their marriage would have probably been blessed and arranged by then. Although their relationship had 'officially' ended they continued to see each other sporadically for twenty years. It was clear that the sexual transgression of coming out as lesbian was too much for Fatima, it was not a life she could lead. It is one thing to have a relationship (physical and emotional) with a woman, but another thing to call yourself a 'lesbian'<sup>67</sup>.

Jameela, Vaneshree and Preeti have all had relationships with women who were not comfortable with being visibly gay. This points to two things namely; that sexuality is fluid and far from the binary terms we use to describe it, and that pressure is exerted on us and our sexualities to conform to heterosexist ideals.

## **Marriage As A Way Out**

I grew up in the context where it wasn't given that you were going to go and study. And you had to fight for being different not just on a level of sexuality but also if you wanted to study as a woman and not follow the path that had been predetermined for you as in marriage and children. And, I tried to work out how I was going to do this...

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<sup>67</sup> Foucault is one of the earliest promulgators of this perspective. In his book *The History of Sexuality* (1976) he discusses how the homosexual as a separate and deviant category was created. Jeffery Weeks also engages with this issue in his book *Against Nature* (1991) where he talks about how 'homosexual' behaviour is not the same as a 'homosexual' identity.

Behaving 'well' earns you social currency within the context of the neighbourhood, but what is the cost of this social approval? Marriage is an important rite of passage in the Indian community. When you marry you become a 'responsible adult'. It does not have to be a happy marriage just a productive one, i.e. bear children<sup>68</sup>. Jameela sees marriage as 'a stepping stone' to her eventual freedom. Marriage is a social institution which affords the individual a position of privilege in our society. Even though Jameela is aware that marriage as an institution can be oppressive (particularly to women) she entertains the idea of getting married, because therein lies the possibility of divorce. In our society divorced women are afforded more freedom than single women. They can operate as autonomous individuals because they have graduated from girlhood into adulthood. Here exists the contradiction that in order to actualise her freedom she has to accept the bondage of marriage and even sex with a man.

Jameela gets engaged to the son of a family friend. But three months into the façade Jameela starts to question her motives. She asked herself if marriage is supposed to be 'natural' and 'normal' why are so many people unhappily married (her parents included)? Why do people look for affections outside of marriage and have affairs? Jameela saw the hypocrisy in society and this made her question the lie she was endorsing. What was she resigning herself to by doing what was expected of her, by doing the 'right thing'? She proceeds to sabotage the relationship, behaving belligerently hoping that her fiancé would tire of her antics and call off the engagement. To her dismay he shrugs off her theatrics as a case of 'cold' but not 'frozen' feet. Jameela explains to her fiancé that she is not ready to get married. Her fiancé being a very understanding fellow accepts her decision and their engagement is called off. Jameela's parents were mortified because in those days a broken engagement was 'like a death sentence'.

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<sup>68</sup> See Suparna Bhaskaran 2004, *Made In India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/National Projects* and Maya Sharma, 2006, *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India* discuss the emphasis placed on marriage in India.

My parents were obviously very upset and it was the first time in their experience that a child was rebelling against something so serious and the shame of it. In those days a broken engagement was like a death sentence. But my sisters were very good about persuading my parents. It was late seventies. The issue around wanting to breaking out of that community and that way of life was not only about sexuality, it was about politics, it was about values, it was about wanting to be an academic, wanting different things for myself.

Going against her parents so blatantly is one of the hardest things Jameela has ever had to do. The agreement to get married is not an agreement between two people alone; it includes their families and communities. Jameela backtracking on this agreement reflected badly on her character and brought shame to the family name<sup>69</sup>. People would be talking about the broken engagement for weeks if not months. The family would have to come up with a reason/excuse for their daughter's transgression. I say it is better to have a broken engagement than an unhappy marriage.

Her older sisters act as buffers during this tumultuous time. They are understanding and supportive because they identified with Jameela's struggle for her freedom and personal autonomy. All of her older sisters were forced into arranged marriages and this experience had severely traumatised them. None of her sisters were happy in their marriages, with no alternatives presented to them (and no education), they were shackled into a lifetime of dependency, more so once they had children. From their predicaments it was clear to Jameela that the power relations that exist between men and women, is skewed in the formers favour. She sees that it is difficult for a woman to live a life independent of a man, and financial

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69. In Maya Sharma's (2006) beautifully written book *Loving Women*: she examines how honour is tied to family name and social capital, especially when people have little or no resources their honour/name is all that they have to maintain a sense of dignity amidst undignified conditions.

independence for women is instrumental (albeit not the only thing needed) to breaking this unhealthy co-dependency.

Her parent's marriage was arranged and according to Jameela this arrangement was restrictive to the personal liberties/freedoms of both parties. Jameela believes that her father felt trapped into the role of father and husband before he was ready; therefore he tended to be quite aloof and distant with respects to his family. Her father spent most of his time outside the house while her mother took charge of the household and cared for the children. She saw that while her mother had her own interests, she was unable to pursue them independently, because the family came first. Her mother was very talented but all of her ambitions/desires took a back seat to her roles as wife and mother. Jameela says that the women in her family were beyond their time and they felt restricted and controlled by this system of cultural patriarchy. Women were not encouraged to become self-made they were expected to be dependent on men for social, physical and financial protection and be dependent on other women for emotional support.

### **Education for Independence, an Acceptable Transgression**

For as long as she can remember she wanted to study to law. She was accepted by almost every university in the country but her father failed to see the benefit of educating a girl child, he believed that a woman's work is inside the house. There were hardly any girls in her area who had received tertiary education and even if they did educate themselves the end expected result was marriage and child-rearing<sup>70</sup>. Therefore educating a girl would be an investment lost.

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<sup>70</sup> See Frederick Engels *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) on the situation of women in the family, as well as Bhaskaran, S., 2004, *Made In India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/National* for role occupied by Indian women in the family

Jameela is now more than ever determined to study, she believes that by educating herself she will be able to support herself and break this dependency on men<sup>71</sup>. Jameela runs away to Cape Town where she enrolls for a BA at the University of Cape Town (UCT). When word gets out that she is gone to Cape Town to study, concerned parents in the community converge at her house. They want to know why her parents allowed her to go so far away from home. To avoid a social scandal her father, Essop, says that Jameela left with their blessings to further her studies. He further added that Jameela was a good student who always wanted to go and study. To avoid people talking Essop claims her actions. Instead of being the parent with an 'uncontrollable' child he has a good daughter who is bettering herself, which will then benefit the community. Although Essop takes ownership for her actions and appears to be in full support of his daughter, in reality this is not the case. Essop does not speak to her for four years because she had run away. She was able to do what he could not, she was able to choose for herself, even if her choices meant going against the highest figures of authority in your life, your parents<sup>72</sup>.

there was an immense, a lot of anger and not understanding what this was about. Why is my child doing this?

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71 It has been about three years since she finished school and by doing 'odd jobs' as often as possible she was able to save enough money for the first year of university.

72 Your parents are supposed to be your universe, your world. In Hindu theology Shiva was given a beautiful scrumptious mango and was told to give it to his favourite son. Shiva having two sons, not wanting to pick favourites, told both his sons that whoever went around the world first would win the mango. His youngest son, Lord Muruga wasting no time set off swiftly travelling around the world on his peacock. His eldest son, Ganesha who had a penchant for food was more sluggish in movements. But being very bright, he got his mother (Parvati) and father (Shiva) together. He walked around them, declaring that they were his world and universe. Ganesha got the mango. This theme of respecting your parents and treating them like your God no matter what is present in many Bollywood movies that supposedly postulate 'proper Indian values'. For an example of this see the movie *Bagbhan* starring Amitabh Bachchan



When you transgress social mores you are seen to be bringing disrepute to your family name, accompanied with the threat/fear of being ostracised by the community. Rather than appearing as an incongruent unit, the appearance of unity is purported by all the members of the family. While there was a lot of tension inside the house, according to the people in her community Jameela was a pioneer.

After Jameela left Marabastad to go university what followed was a number of girls requesting the same. Parents started compromising by agreeing to send their girls to racially demarcated universities closer to home<sup>73</sup>. In Johannesburg this meant you attended WITS or went to teacher's training college. According to Jameela the Indian community in Marabastad was beginning to realise that skills were required beyond 'those of a general dealership', and that girls' could become far more valuable to their families if they were given skills beyond domestic work.

When Jameela's younger sister matriculated it was understood that she was going to go to university. Even though her father 'bitched about finances' whether or not she would be allowed to attend wasn't even a debate, which signified the change in how the family and namely her father, viewed women. This was one battle won. Education gave Jameela her personal autonomy. When her father saw how well she was doing at university he would brag to people in the community about her, although he never told her himself that he was proud of her, in moments he would show her that he was<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> Therefore enabling parents to monitor their girl's actions.

<sup>74</sup> For example when he offered to pay for her LLB degree. She had managed to secure a partial scholarship and when he heard her talking to university personnel saying that she only had some of the money, he offered to pay the rest, saying that he remembers as a small girl she always wanted to be a lawyer. This moment touches Jameela as it signifies an end to the rift they had in their relationship because she defied his authority and ran away to study.

I was determined to live my life the way that I wanted to live it. And If I had to sacrifice my family bonds then so be it. So I was quite out there remote for a while in a space that felt dislodged and rudderless in one way, but in another way was quite exhilarating because I was learning about my own strengths and my own realities, making that happen for me. When I was seventeen, I felt that, if I had lived there, I would have gone from one tunnel to another tunnel without ever seeing the sunlight. And that I wanted to see the sunlight and I wanted to live it. So I think it wasn't just sexuality, because in fact it wasn't sexuality that was driving me, it was other things mainstream community and mainstream society could relate to my struggles. She wants to study, nobody said she wants to be gay you know. I would have stopped being gay if I had gotten to study you know. Theoretically speaking. I will never have stopped [we both laugh].

Jameela's main aim/battle is to get to university, not to be gay. Her struggle was one that people could relate to, she finds an acceptable compromise; people would understand her leaving home to study, they would not be as understanding if she left to be gay. Sexuality was not the sole motivation for leaving, but Jameela knew that being away from home would give her the freedom to be, and to express her sexuality uninhibited. Jameela would have endorsed the charade that she was 'straight' if it meant that she would get the opportunity to study. Leaving Marabastad was her primary objective. She knew that there was more to life, and she would seize it, even if it meant feeling 'rudderless and dislodged' along the way.

### ***I didn't even know how to kiss a girl - Vaneshree's first time***

Vaneshree decided to study nursing in Johannesburg. She packed up and headed towards the bright lights eGoli, Johannesburg where she moved into a medical residence in town. According

to Achille Mbembe (2004: 355) 'the city operates as a site of fantasy, desire and imagination'<sup>75</sup>. Vaneshree enjoyed the freedom of being away from home. She was for the most part, anonymous, no history and no expectations. Vaneshree did not have to worry about what people might say because she was far removed from her community. This gave Vaneshree the space to explore her sexuality without accountability, albeit not without tension.

Vaneshree was involved with a guy whom she had known throughout her high school career. They got engaged but unfortunately he passed away in a car accident. After a while she started dating other guys but something wasn't right with these relationships. Vaneshree felt as if something was missing from these relationships but she wasn't sure what. Feeling uninspired by the men around her she decided to 'go solo' for a year, busying herself with her studies.

In 1999 she met a woman who was also in the medical profession, a paramedic. Initially she thought that the woman was a man because she was 'so butch looking'. At the time Vaneshree was 'looking particularly hot' so she was accustomed to receiving attention from the opposite sex. She was shocked to discover that it was a woman pursuing her, but clearly not shocked enough to stop the flirtation.

Vaneshree knew that she was going against societal precepts by pursuing this relationship. She knew that she was capable of feeling more than she had in her previous relationships. Even if culture and tradition said that this was wrong she knew and felt otherwise. The level of intimacy she felt with this woman surpassed what she had felt with her fiancé. Because of culture and tradition she was led to believe that there was only one way of being which made her feel like 'a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.' She had doubted herself thinking that maybe she was the one with intimacy issues but now she was in a relationship where 'it felt right' and 'emotions had a place'.

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<sup>75</sup> Mbembe, A. *Public Culture*, "Writing the world from an African Metropolis". in *Public Culture* 16(3): 355. 2004.

Although she was not sure what to expect from this relationship she was willing to take the risk, even if it meant going against her culture, tradition, family responsibilities and expectations. Vaneshree decided if she couldn't find a Mr. Right she could be happy with a Ms. Right. Vaneshree knew that this was 'the real deal', and that she would encounter difficulties if she tried to enjoy this relationship openly. She keeps her relationship a secret and conducts it under the guise of 'friendship'.

I think that the stumbling block I hit was that I couldn't openly say that I'm a lesbian. I couldn't openly say that I was involved with a woman so in terms of disguise my family still believed I had a boy friend, I had a partner, yes of course there was this person that was phoning me there was this person that sent me messages when they came over they would find teddy bears in my room, I wouldn't be buying them for myself, you know, and they'd find love bites on my neck for example and that couldn't happen on its own you know and I had to justify that, and the only justification was to say I had a boy friend, you know, I don't think I wanted to calm the storm but if we go on further in this conversation you will realise why I say that I didn't want to come out then and say to them you know what actually I am lesbian.

Vaneshree was unable to call herself a lesbian publicly. Yes she was having a love affair with another woman but she couldn't bring herself to declare this love publicly<sup>76</sup>. Her parents were under the impression that she was involved with a man. Given that heterosexuality is the norm they just assumed that she liked men, and Vaneshree chose not to tell them otherwise. Vaneshree was not explicit about her sexuality and like Jameela she understood the need for 'strategic silence'. This silence or not saying gave Vaneshree the space she needed 'to make

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<sup>76</sup> For accounts such as this one where women engage in same-sex relationships but choose not to call themselves anything because they don't identify with western terms such as lesbian, or don't even know that there is a word for their love see Sharma, M. 2006. *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India*. New Dehli: Yoda Press

sense of things'<sup>77</sup>. This silence was not without tension, by remaining silent their love was relegated to the realm of friendship. Not being able to express their relationship publicly endorsed the notion that this love was 'unnatural' or 'deviant'. They were treated as two girlfriends (i.e. girls who were friends) and not afforded the respect and social status that a monogamous heterosexual couple would receive. Personally I can relate to this because my relationship with my partner is often relegated to the friendship realm, when outsiders refer to us.

Sexuality is unlike other social markers such as race and sex which are 'visible' on your body. It is only when you are a gender bender, i.e. a femme man or butch woman, that your sexuality is called into question<sup>78</sup>. All of my respondents are feminine women who 'look straight' i.e. not butch dyke. Therefore all of them are assumed 'straight' before they declare/disclose otherwise. In our society, heterosexuality is the all pervasive form of being; it surrounds us 'undeclared'<sup>79</sup>, until it is challenged by alternative interpretations of sexuality<sup>80</sup>.

### **Turning Point: Cancer and the End of the Affair**

In 1998 Vaneshree develops cancer. This is the most difficult battle she has ever had to fight.

Vaneshree was physically and emotionally drained by the whole experience. Her lover was very

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77 This is why Jameela says that she is one of the fortunate ones for always knowing she was gay. If you always knew that you were gay you can start strategising from a young age whereas if it happens later in life when you've already started to live to a heterosexual life it is a severe culture shock. There are a lot of issues you have to deal with internally (understanding the shift in feelings) and externally (accountability to family, children, husband, boyfriend, parents, society).

78 See Judith Butler "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" p307-p321, and Monique Wittig "One Is Not Born a Woman", p103-110 both in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies reader*, as well as Majorie Garbers book *Vested Interests*, on the construction of gender (as performance) and its representations.

79 Heterosexuals don't have to disclose their status.

80 Bhattacharyya, G. 2002. *Sex and Society: an Introduction*. London: Routledge,

supportive while she was sick, and after many sessions of chemotherapy the cancer goes into remission. During this time Vaneshree discovers that her lover has been unfaithful numerous times, even while she was sick. Feeling hurt and frustrated Vaneshree realises that this was not the kind of relationship she wanted to be in. Aware of life's fragility she could not contend with such unhappiness. Cancer forced her to look inward and become 'self-aware', instead of looking to others for meaning she was going to find her own rhythm of life.

Vaneshree's hurt and confusion made her doubt her sexual orientation. She gave voice and space to the negativity associated with same-sex desires. This relationship with a woman didn't work so maybe she wasn't a lesbian after all. Maybe she was looking for something else maybe this wasn't love? Maybe she was projecting the fact that she wasn't very close to her mother and yearned for a nurturing female figure in her life? She wasn't sure where she stood in relation to her sexuality and she didn't have anyone to discuss these feelings with. Vaneshree felt alone. She analysed her feelings and actions in terms of what religion, culture, society and tradition says, because these were her points of reference and her sources of refuge. Feeling constrained and cocooned by her culture, Vaneshree asks herself; 'How do I continue being who I am in a world that exists in culture and tradition? When the relationship ends she spends her time reflecting and introspecting, trying to resolve her tumultuous emotional state.

Vaneshree is single for quite a while before she meets Fikile who is her current lover. They meet purely by chance through a mutual friend at Reigerpark Clinic. It was love at first sight for Fikile. Smitten she sources Vaneshree's phone number (not knowing whether she is gay or not) and their telephonic romancing begins. By then things felt so natural that Vaneshree didn't question her sexuality. She loves Fikile and that's all she needs to know<sup>81</sup>.

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<sup>81</sup> Fikile being a LGBTQI activist probably assisted Vaneshree in accepting her same-sex desires. Fikile has always been open and unapologetic about her 'lesbianism'.

And my identity by then was that it feels so natural to be with a woman that I didn't even question it. You know, like I said, I was still analysing in my head whether this is the right thing to do. You know, or is it better just to stay single and just let everyone talk what they want to talk<sup>82</sup> but what I realised in the process is that, this is who I am. And I think my happiness matters. If you are happy with a guy, I can't force, when you go out there today and find a guy for yourself I don't say anything, I don't ask 'Why does he have this colour hair you know? Why does he wear these earrings? Why does he dress like this? Why doesn't he dress like this?' you know, I don't do that I accept him for who he is, your family will accept you for who he is. So why not accept me for who I am?

According to Vaneshree your sexual partner is a reflection on you; you will be 'measured' according to the choice to make. If you make a 'good' choice your family will accept you and him and if you make a 'bad' choice your family will not accept the relationship. Like Jameela, Vaneshree felt torn between two lives; the one laid out to her by cultural conventions for 'a good Indian girl' and the one she wanted/desired/needed to live. In their context these two choices were mutually exclusive i.e. good=convention, bad=transgression. Women are grown up believing that their needs and desires are secondary to that of their husband and children, forever the care-givers but never the care given. Even if she lived a lie to make others happy, they will still find something to talk about. Vaneshree realised that this was who she is; she was WLW, and her 'happiness matters'. Vaneshree had found her freedom. According to her, freedom` is not doing what you want to do; freedom is knowing who you are and being it.

***I haven't given much thought to my gayness. - Preeti***

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<sup>82</sup> Asexuality is also a sexual mode of being that raises concern in the community unless it is abstinence for religious purposes. I can relate to this because I was single for many years before I got involved with anyone and my asexuality was always a topic of discussion amongst my friends and cousins.

Preeti didn't give much thought to her 'gayness'. She just did what felt 'nice'. Preeti had her first same-sex experience with her best friend from high school Oshun. Although Preeti does remember earlier sexual play with another girl when she was six years old, she considers it childhood games rather than her first real sexual encounter. She and Oshun attended the same Durban girls' high school. According to Preeti one rainy day while they were walking home from school chatting and enjoying the rain on their skin as the droplets made their way through the mandatory white tunic. Oshun stopped and slowly but suddenly kissed Preeti. Preeti was pleasantly surprised; she enjoyed the kiss so they continue to do so in the rain. Oshun and Preeti start having a romantic and sexual relationship. They would meet after school at each other's houses and being of the same-sex they were able to spend copious amounts of unsupervised time together.

We would have sleepovers at, and when people would ask who she is I would say that she is just the school friend. No one said anything or suspected anything.

No one said anything but Preeti suspected that her sister Apsara knew, although she never broached the topic. They both maintained the silence and the secrecy around the relationship. Apsara did not want to disturb the fragile equilibrium at home, and nothing maintains the status quo better than silence.

According to Preeti she cared a lot about Oshun but it was youthful love, a school romance not something so intense that she might consider building a life with her. The relationship starts to sour, as Oshun felt that Preeti was too aloof and didn't give her enough attention while Preeti felt that Oshun was far too possessive and needy. Whenever Preeti tried



to leave, Oshun would threaten suicide or she would threaten to disclose the true nature of their relationship to Preeti's family. Feeling 'emotionally drained' Preeti decided to end their relationship in the first term of matric. In retaliation Oshun called Preeti's father and told him that she had been romantically involved with his daughter from the time they were fifteen years old. Preeti's father who had never shown any keen interest in his children's lives, dismissed Oshun's claims, he was of the opinion that that the two friends must have had 'some teenage fight' which led to the wild accusations being made by Oshun.

### **Family Values: Gender Roles and Responsibilities**

Preeti wanted to become a doctor she applied but was not accepted so instead she enrolled for a medical science degree at the University of Durban Westville (UDW). Her father as usual, instead of offering support, insults calling her a 'disappointment' amongst other things. Although her father refuses to fund Preeti's studies directly (because he didn't think that girls should be educated) she gets a bursary from the company he works for. While it was clear that Preeti's father favoured his sons funding all their business ventures, he made sure that his family was 'taken care of' financially. Even the extended family relied on him for financial support, as almost every family member made a living directly or indirectly through one of his businesses. The fact that he was the *mota papa*<sup>83</sup> meant that he was a law unto himself; even the abuse he lashed out went on without him being reprimanded. Once again, what happens in the family stays in the family. Rather than tarnish the family name by exposing the father's abuse, the family decides to ignore and endure.

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83 'Big Daddy' in Gujarati

Just before she begins varsity Preeti is dealt a severe blow. Her step mother dies in her arms from an asthma attack. Her life takes a downward spiral because her mother was 'the cement that kept things together'. To make matters worse, while the children were still trying to deal with the death of their mother, her father brings his young Jewish girlfriend (who is slightly older than Preeti) to move in with them. The children were devastated because this was their mother's house, and by Preeti's accounts 'seeing this woman prance around in her place was like rubbing salt in an open wound'. With the death of their mother, the two oldest girls (Preeti and her older sister Apsara) had to now run the house, which meant tending to their father and his girlfriend's needs.

He was really spoilt, I mean he's one of those typical Indian men that would go to work with a picnic basket of hot food and roti. We [Preeti and Apsara] had to tend to all of that. His 20-something girlfriend couldn't do anything for herself she was totally helpless beyond...

Preeti failed her first year of university and she attributes this to the persistent physical and emotional abuse she had to endure from her father. As a 'good Indian girl' she was expected to cook and be able to fulfil numerous domestic duties. It is interesting to note that her father did not expect a similar form of femininity from his White girlfriend. His new girlfriend was not expected to do the chores that this wife did, instead that role was to be filled by Preeti and her sister.

### **Leaving Home to Study: A Quest for Personal Autonomy**

Given the tumultuous arrangement at home Preeti decided that it would be best if she studied away from home. She enrolled at the University of the Transkei (Unitra) where she passed all her subjects. She applied to study medicine and was unfortunately rejected a second time. Shelving the idea of medicine, she returned to Durban and enrolled at UDW for a medical science degree. According to Preeti returning to the craziness of her family life put her under immense stress, so much so that she failed yet again. This time her family was of the sentiment that she should quit her studies and get married, according to Preeti it was clear to them that she was 'too stupid to study anything'.

I didn't quite agree with that obviously. So I snuck off one day and I went to Medunsa and I enrolled there and that's when I started doing dentistry

At Medunsa Preeti met her first boyfriend called Nirvan. According to Preeti this was her first 'serious' adult relationship and she describes Nirvan as a 'quite camp' male individual<sup>84</sup>. She loved him and she could have gotten married to him but she was not *in* love with him. She never 'lusted after him' and she found the sex 'quite disappointing'. Preeti believes that this relationship was an attempt on her part 'to do the right thing' i.e. conform to heterosexuality. She didn't want to appear dysfunctional or deviant she wanted to appear 'normal'.

Her relationship Nirvan was both physically and emotionally abusive. Preeti was duplicating her home situation because she had grown accustomed to violence, as a means of communication and control. She started abusing alcohol and would cause a ruckus at the hostel

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<sup>84</sup> Insinuating that he too could have been a closet gay.

residence<sup>85</sup>. Preeti tried to kill herself by overdosing on pills but Nirvan was able to reach her in time to induce vomiting and save her.

the relationship [with Nirvan] was an absolute nightmare. We fought a lot he clearly didn't want to be in the relationship and I was gay

The relationship was horrible for the both of them. He clearly had his issues and Preeti knew that she was gay. Although Preeti does not talk directly about Nirvan's issues she hints that he might have been a closet gay. She failed yet another year at university and started to doubt her herself; maybe she didn't have what it takes to study? Maybe she should get married or go and work in the family shop like everyone else. As Preeti recalls it, one day she just 'woke up', and it is only when you wake up do you realise that you've been sleeping.

She decided to focus her mind on the task at hand which was to complete her studies. Preeti knew that she wanted more from life, more than what had been predetermined for her. And she believed that by becoming a professional she would be able to realise her dreams. She ended her dead-end relationship with Nirvan and focused all her attention on her studies. In the process Preeti starts dating a really good friend of hers called Swastika. This is Preeti's first relationship that is nurturing and loving, with Swastika she is replenished not just drained. Preeti describes this relationship as a magical encounter of like minds and souls. They connected, and they 'got each other' and the time they spent together were some of her happiest moments. Swastika was not comfortable with having a relationship with another woman according to Preeti she 'had huge issues with being gay'. For Swastika her relationship with Preeti could never

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85 On one occasion she kicked the door to her boyfriend's room down. Because she had grown up with violence, Preeti says that she herself had a terribly violent streak. Now she deals with her problems differently but then being violent and aggressive was her first response when she felt as if the situation was out of her control.

extend beyond the university walls, she did not see their relationship as a viable alternative to heterosexuality.

Their complicated relationship lasted for the three years that it took them both to complete their respective degrees. When they graduated they both returned home and Swastika got married to a man. According to Preeti, Swastika came from a very controlling family that had 'mapped out her whole life'. Swastika was not allowed to live a life of her own making instead she had to succumb to her family wishes. Unlike Preeti, Jameela and Vaneshree she was unable to challenge her family's moral authority. Swastika like Jameela's father felt confined by cultural precepts and was unable to rebel against these institutions. Ironically because Preeti had grown up unsupervised since the death of her mother, the only person she was answerable to was herself. Therefore she did not have to deal with any 'greater societal pressure' to the same extent as Swastika, there was no one watching how she lived, and if people did talk she didn't care, according to Preeti she had enough problems of her own. Although she acknowledges if she had 'come out' as gay to her Gujarati community, it would have been social suicide.

Preeti's situation is similar to Jameela's, she was comfortable with being gay, she had accepted herself, however the woman she was seeing was not comfortable with her same-sex desires. It is easy to have a sex and 'play house' with a woman temporarily but it is far more complicated to acknowledge the love relationship as a viable and valid alternative to the heterosexual model<sup>86</sup>. Preeti was very disappointed when her relationship with Swastika ended because according to her she really 'fell hard' for this woman. Seeing how difficult it can be for a single woman to make her own life's choices in the Indian community, Preeti was determined to

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86 In the U.S.A there has been a lot written on same-sex relationships amongst women on university residences. Girls play at being gay, due to homosocialisation, till they have to assume 'proper' woman roles i.e. get marriage and have babies.

be in a position of personal autonomy. This meant that she would have to become financially independent from her monster of a father. She 'applied her mind' and 'finished dentistry without failing a year'. She relocated and to Johannesburg and her life was her own.

## **Comparative Analysis**

### ***Heteronormativity, Sexuality and Gender Performance***

Homosexual behaviour has always been present in society however the meaning of that behaviour has differed across time and space<sup>87</sup>. In our context homosexual behaviour has become equated with a homosexual or gay identity. Homosexual behaviour has also been constructed as a deviant behaviour. All of the stories reflect an awareness that their same-sex desires ran concurrently and in alleged opposition to normative sexuality. They understood that if they pursued their love publicly and openly, they would more than likely encounter hostility from the community around them. As noted by Bhattacharyya (2002: 21) 'heteronormativity is a far reaching ideology of public compliance' propagating only one way of living.

Heteronormativity means that results in women calling their lovers 'friends' and on the flip makes society, friends and family call loved ones 'friends' even if the relationship is declared . Many Indian WLW render their loves and lives mute by complying with a veneer of heterosexuality rather than risk exposure for flouting societal norms. The veneer of heterosexuality can be maintained in various ways. It is especially easy to comply with when one adopts normative performances of gender. By that I mean that your gender performance is not at 'odds' with your biological sex. In our Western context gender is inextricably linked to the

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<sup>87</sup> See Gayle Rubin's *Radical Notes for Sexual theory* and with particular reference to 'homosexualities' see Jeffrey Weeks, 1991, *Against Nature: essays on history, sexuality and identity*

biological sex of the body<sup>88</sup>. Heterosexuality for all of the women was assumed because they all look like 'normal' or 'proper' women. They are not 'butch looking' therefore it is not assumed that they are lesbian<sup>89</sup>. People have stereotyped ideas of what a 'gay' person looks like i.e. butch woman or femme male. Gender is seen to be the determining factor in ones sexuality in this instance. Therefore if you are not a 'masculine', macho man or if you are not a 'feminine' woman you *must* be gay. All of my respondents were able 'pass' as straight unless they declared otherwise. This 'passing' reinforced the silence that surrounds same-sex relationships amongst women as silence maintains the status quo.

Because of the taboo associated with same-sex desires all of the women had to think about their sexuality in relation to society. Existing outside of the norm they interrogated their sexuality in ways that heterosexual woman are rarely pushed to do so. They interrogated their feelings and grew to accept and understand their desires. Your sexual relationship is a social relation after all, afforded a particular status in society<sup>90</sup>. For Jameela the mental processing of her desires happened before she acted on them. She knew early on that she liked women however her early explorations were done with books rather than with people. For Vaneshree and Preeti the actions happened before they had any thoughts about their sexuality. In fact it is only after their same-sex experiences do they start questioning the models that have been presented to them. Vaneshree says that she didn't even know how to be sexual with a woman, this is partly attributed to us being bombarded with heterosexual male centred representations of sex.

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<sup>88</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*. 1993. New York: Routledge

<sup>89</sup> Gender is seen to be the determining factor in ones sexuality in this instance. Therefore if you are not a 'masculine', macho man or if you are not a 'feminine' woman you *must* be gay.

<sup>90</sup> Rubin, Gayle. (1984). *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*

From their stories of romance it is clear that all initial loves/relationships be they straight or gay are learning curves. It has been argued by sexual theorists such as Bhattacharyya that romance itself is constructed around heterosexual ideals<sup>91</sup>. What is different in the context of same-sex love is that often this love is a 'secret' – it is 'closeted'. Therefore all learning loving and heartbreak takes place silently and quietly. None of the women interviewed were able to talk about their relationships to those closest to them, that in itself says much about the taboo nature of same-sex desires in the Indian community and in South Africa. According to Ruth Morgan of GALA, WLW get into the habit of keeping their loves a secret as a result few ever get used to expressing their sexuality openly<sup>92</sup>.

### ***Notions of Honour, Respectability and Responsibility: Silence, Secrecy and Gender***

Given that same-sex relationships are considered taboo in the Indian community (and in numerous other communities locally and internationally) all of the women saw the need to be strategic about the contexts in which they disclosed/divulged/exposed their sexuality. They had to experience their first loves and heartbreak quietly and alone. Jameela was not able to speak to anyone about her relationship with Fatima, and because of internal homophobia they were unable to talk about their relationship as a couple. They could not talk about their relationship because underlying their love was a feeling that they were doing wrong in the community's eye.

For both Jameela and Preeti who had their first same-sex experiences as young girls, the outing of one's sexual orientation to the family would have been unwise to say the least. They wielded

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91 See Bhattacharyya, Gargi, *Sexuality and Society : an introduction*. 2002.

92 For more see the GALA archives for life histories of WLW especially the interviews done by Mary Louw with women from Eldoradopark.



neither the moral, cultural or material authority to rebel against their family and community. Instead remaining secretive about their love offered their relationship a protective bubble in which to exist. For Vaneshree the first sexual experience with another woman happened later in life, yet she too opted for silence and secrecy. All of the women chose secrecy because certain expectations were placed on them as Indian girls in the family.

As girls the honour of the family name is attached to their sexual purity. They are supposed to remain chaste until married. Therefore the movement of single girls in the community is severely policed especially after their first menstrual cycle. To avoid the threat of premarital sex and pregnancy homosocialisation is encouraged. Incidentally in this case silence and honour served to assist the girls in meeting their lovers. They were all able to maintain that the relationship was just a friendship. In the case of Jameela and Preeti the parents easily believed the lies they were fed, even when Oshun tries to tell Preeti's father about the true nature of their relationship he dismisses her claims as childish banter. They didn't need to 'make breaks'<sup>93</sup> to see their girlfriends. In fact their girlfriends had house permission albeit under the guise of 'friendship'. If anything was 'suspected' nothing was said. This silence allowed them to have unadulterated unlimited access to their lovers. If in this instance honour and silence made it easier to pursue their relationships it was also these very concepts that constrained and muted their love and life.

Because of notions such as family honour and respectability, they were constantly aware and worried about people talking, what would people say if their sexual transgressions became public knowledge? And in fact what seemed to be the greater concern was the family reaction to the news. As Indian girls they were supposed to be respectable and follow their parent's wishes, even if it conflicted with their own – because your parents know what is best for you<sup>94</sup>. As noted

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<sup>93</sup> Slang for having a secret space, time alone together away from prying eyes.

<sup>94</sup> See Suparna Bhaskaran 2004, *Made In India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/National Projects*

by Kirtsoglou (2002:20) the position of the family in the social arena is dependent on whether or not they can preserve their reputation in the eyes of the community. Therefore any social transgression reflects negatively on the family name. All of the women experienced a tension between what was expected of them (compliance with the collective) and the lives they wanted to lead as autonomous individuals<sup>95</sup>.

### ***Gender Dynamics: Roles and Responsibilities***

As women they were expected to get married and have babies, this was their 'life plan' according to their parents and community. Jameela tried to conform but decided it would be living a lie. All of the women had relationships with men at some point or another in their lives, but either something was 'missing' from the relationship or it was their attempt at trying to lead a 'normal life'. The pressure to conform and maintain the status quo is enormous<sup>96</sup>. Jameela and Preeti's early loves (as well as some of their later ones) buckled under this pressure. They wanted to remain quiet about their 'indiscretions' and they wanted to move on to normalcy i.e. a heterosexual marriage. Vaneshree also experienced self-doubt about her sexuality but this was largely due to her lover's indiscretions.

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95 For an excellent account on this tension that exists particularly for WLW in the Indian community see Maya Sharma's book *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India* (2006).

96 See Maya Sharma, 2006, *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India*

### ***Leaving Home: Personal Agency, Social and Financial Independence***

Jameela, Vaneshree and Preeti were aware of the contradictions that exist in our society. They were told that they should get married, yet it seemed that people around them were unhappily married. As girls and then as women they witnessed firsthand how boys and men are 'favoured' over women. Jameela noticed this early on, she saw what was expected of women and she watched her sisters being forced into marriages which left them severely traumatised. Preeti saw how her brothers received preferential treatment over her and her sisters. Vaneshree saw how people can be constrained and restrained by culture and tradition. Seeing these cracks in the system made it easier for them to seize their personal autonomy. They all believed that their happiness matters. This is a powerful realisation for any person to come to, particularly for women the obliged care-givers in our society.

For Jameela the main battle was not finding a space for her sexuality, it was finding a way to become socially and financially independent. She wanted to study and she wanted to leave home because she felt that her political and social growth was restricted by the insular environment of Marabastad. Vaneshree too wanted to explore life away from her parents and Durban's conservative Indian community. Vaneshree, Jameela and Preeti were aware that becoming financially and socially independent, particularly of men, meant that you would be an autonomous individual. You would be able to make your own choices as Vaneshree stated, 'you decide where and with whom you sleep tonight.' All of the women opted to attend universities away from home intentionally.

All of the women saw education as the key to empowering themselves. They wanted to become professional women capable of looking after themselves. Education with the intention

of becoming a professional such as a doctor, lawyer or accountant is considered prestigious in the Indian community. Therefore by going to university they were earning themselves social capital and status in the community. Rather than leave to be gay, they left home to get educated. This was a struggle that people in the community could relate to. However getting educated was not easy. Jameela had to do so without her parent's approval because her father didn't think that a girl needed to be educated. He eventually changed his stance once he realised that she was a successful lawyer and someone he could be proud of.

Therefore while sexuality was not their primary motivating factor for leaving home, they understood that being away from home and getting educated would enable them to be agents in their lives. Social and financial independence meant that they would be able to live uninhibited<sup>97</sup> as WLW. However being an educated independent woman, does not alleviate societal pressure to get married. As noted earlier marriage is an important institution to the Indian community, every adult must get married. Living away from home definitely made it easier for them to live their lives relatively free from parental interference, but at some point they would have to go home and deal with questions relating to their sexuality. At some time the news about their sexual orientation would have to come out.

In the following section I will discuss each woman's coming out process. I wanted to know how they disclosed their sexuality to those around them. Did they do so explicitly? Or did their sexuality gradually become common knowledge? These were some of the questions I asked them. Following from the previous section if their first sexual experience was the catalyst bringing them closer to a gay or lesbian identity, then the coming out process is when they publicly claim that identity to explain their sexual preference for women. These stories show that

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<sup>97</sup> As one can be in a homophobic society

sexual behaviours and sexual identities are varied. Although you might partake in homosexual behaviour this does not mean that you identify with a lesbian or homosexual identity

### ***THE PROCESS OF 'COMING OUT'***

*Your Guide to Coming Out*<sup>98</sup> a self-help booklet geared specifically at helping people involved in, or desiring to be in, same-sex relationships, defines the process as follows:

'Coming out' is a term we use to describe *the process of acknowledging our self-identification with a particular sexual orientation and disclosing this understanding and acceptance to other people*. Such people could include close relatives, close friends, peers or even colleagues.<sup>99</sup>

'Coming out' according to this definition entails two parts, first the acknowledgement for yourself, i.e. you have accepted desires and *identify* with a particular sexual orientation. And secondly it entails disclosing your sexuality to those who are in your life. Vaneshree, Jameela and Preeti have all 'come out' in some form or another. First they 'came out' to themselves and then to those around them. As noted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) in her seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet*, even the most progressive people are to some extent in the closet. Sedgwick (1993) refers to homosexuality as the 'open secret' because the process of coming out is perpetual and in some instances it is strategic not to disclose your sexuality. Because of the monopoly that heterosexuality has on sexuality, homosexuality is always something that requires declaration. My respondents do not hide their love but this was not always the case and getting to this point was an arduous process. Knowing that their love is taboo all of my respondents

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98 Published by The Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre, Compiled by Jacques Livingston, Personal Counselling & Support Groups Project Coordinator. Emphasis my own

99 Ibid. p4.

were concerned about what people might say. They opted for silence and secrecy rather than disturb the status quo. Living away from home made it easier to live life independently of social and cultural constraints.

Eventually all of my respondents had to return home and deal with questions of marriage. As noted earlier marriage is seen as a rite of passage into adulthood in the Indian community. Preeti, Jameela and Vaneshree could not remain mute about their same-sex relationships forever in some way, or another, their sexual preferences for women would be revealed. In this section I am going to discuss the 'coming out' process as pertains to each individual. How did they come out to their families? How did their families come to know even if they didn't tell them? Such questions will inform this particular chapter. This is about each woman's arrival into society as a 'homosexual' and how those around them came to receive the news.

I will also discuss some of the debates that have surfaced around the issue of 'coming out' as it pertains to sexual identity and identity politics. In western culture the confessional/disclosure is seen as necessary for the healing/cathartic experience<sup>100</sup>. This is not always the case. And we should be mindful not to conflate the coming out experience as necessarily emancipatory. It does much in terms of personal engagements in that now individuals are relating to the truth. But does the process of 'coming out' do much to challenge heterosexual hegemony or does in fact entrench this difference?

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100 Matti Bunzl, *Queer Reading of Austrian (Homo)sexualities*. P217.

## ***'Ma I have something to tell you' - Vaneshree's Story***

### **A Suspicious Kind of Friendship: Homophobia and Racial Prejudice**

Vaneshree had no intention of 'coming out' to her mother in the manner she did but under the circumstances it was unavoidable. She and Fikile had finally settled into a place of their own, after being stranded for months, they were looking forward to some suburban bliss<sup>101</sup>. Having their own space meant they could relate freely as lovers without having to consider other people's reactions. Vaneshree calls this particular time 'the calm before the storm' which should give you a sense of the battle that was yet to transpire. Vaneshree's mother, Durga comes to Jozi to care for her daughter after the accident. Immediately she is suspicious about the true nature of Vaneshree and Fikile's friendship.

My mother was confused by our relationship. She was very conservative and she could not understand how I was able to have such a close friendship with a Black woman. She knew I had a friend called Fikile but she wanted to know why are Fikile's clothes packed in the same wardrobe as mine? Why was she wearing my jacket? Why was she wearing my shoes? Why were we drinking out of the same cups? Why were we eating out of the same plates? Why do we feed each other? You know, why all these things, she wanted to know why and I didn't have an answer. I said ma it's just part of the friendship, it's the convenience of friendship. The friendship was too intimate for my mother and my excuses did little to placate her, my mother was really getting curious. The deceit was also taking its toll on our relationship, because Fikile is very upfront about

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101 As a result of homophobia they were both asked to leave the places they were living in. not having much money at the time they moved around from one friends place to the next. A kind and caring senior nurse who was like a mother to the two (Vaneshree and Fikile) let them stay with her till they were able to stand on their own two feet.

her sexuality. She found it difficult to keep up the façade. Feeling the pressure I decided to tell my mother.

Durga's line of questioning revealed her concerns which were twofold: One why was her daughter so physically intimate with another woman? And two why was her daughter so intimate with a Black woman? It was clear that there something more than friendship between them. Fikile said that she was able to be patient because she understands how homophobia works to silence lesbians and their love. Fikile knows that it can be difficult for Black<sup>102</sup> people to come out to their families because within these communities marriage is expected. Vaneshree believed that her not being able to talk about her sexuality openly was one of the factors that contributed to her previous relationship ending. She always felt the need to censor herself and disguise the true nature of the relationship. Considering Durga's reaction I can understand why Vaneshree was hesitant.

I said "Ma, I have something to tell you". She said "what is it?" I said 'Fikile is not my friend.' I looked at her. 'What?' she said. I said 'Fikile is my girlfriend' and my mother being the kind of person that she is she said 'Ja, she's your *girl*<sup>103</sup> and she's your friend.' and I say "Ma she's my girlfriend as if I was a, had a boyfriend, I am gay."

Vaneshree's mum was in a state of denial, even though it was clear that there was something more than friendship between them, it was easier for her to believe that Fikile was the maid. The thought that Fikile could be her daughter's lover was too much for her to bear. Not only was her daughter dating a woman, but a Black woman. Durga had heard about this thing called

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102 Indian, Coloured and Black.

103 Derogatory term used for domestic help. Black women are 'girls' diminutives never equal



‘gail’ on TV but it was far removed from her immediate reality. In Durga’s eyes this was unnatural and wrong, she couldn’t understand why Vaneshree would choose to live a gay life. Feeling as if she was being punished for some wrong doing, Durga kept asking Vaneshree ‘why are you doing this to *me*?’ In one moment her entire world changed. Her dreams of grandchildren and a nice doctor son-in-law were shattered by this revelation. Her daughter was going against her, their culture and traditions.

***What will people say? It only matters if you let it: Family Relations***

Given her mother’s reaction it was clear that Vaneshree’s sexuality had social implications. Her sexuality was a reflection on her character/morality and that of the family unit as a whole. Durga saw Vaneshree’s sexual transgression as a negative reflection on herself. How would she explain her daughter’s lesbianism to the family? Petrified that others might find out, Durga, made Vaneshree, promise not to tell any of their family that she is gay. She also made it clear that if Vaneshree ever appeared on TV or in the paper talking about being gay/gail she would be disowned. Mother and daughter were not able to simmer down the tempers and communicate.

According to Vaneshree the two of them have never enjoyed a particularly warm relationship. Vaneshree always felt closer to her father who was more caring and tender towards her. Therefore Vaneshree’s ‘coming out’ made an already difficult relationship harder. Preeti and Jameela had similar experiences to Vaneshree in this regard. If they had good relationships with those in their lives then disclosing their sexuality did not break those relations, instead it was just another issue that the family as a unit would engage with. The difficult part about ‘coming

out' is that you are 'coming out' as different; different from the naturalised sexuality, different from those around you<sup>104</sup>.

Fikile and Vaneshree both see coming out as an achievement. Fikile says that what usually happens with gay people is that we always refer to our partners as 'friends' when we relate to our families. And it is this silence which is destructive to one's personal well-being and relationships. According to Fikile it gives more psychological relief when we are all relating to the truth, rather than perpetuating a lie. How one loves, or who one chooses to be with, is an important aspect of a person's life, therefore by continuing to live secretly you exclude people from a large part of your life. The couple felt that if Durga really wanted to know her daughter she needed to know that Fikile was Vaneshree's life partner.

To avoid social scandal and people asking questions Durga lives at the couple's house when she visits Johannesburg. When on a return visit to eGoli, Durga stayed at her sister's place instead of Vaneshree's, her actions roused suspicion amongst her family members. Maliga (Durga's sister) wanted to know why she wasn't staying with Vaneshree and if something was the matter? Durga decided that in future to avoid dealing with such questions she would stay at Vaneshree's. Rather than disclose Vaneshree's sexuality to her family, it was easier for her to live with it, literally. The contradiction here is that Durga's denial of their relationship (to her family) has forced her to engage with their relationship by living with them.

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<sup>104</sup> See Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. 1993. NY: Routledge. And Vasu Reddy's "Institutionalizing Sexuality: Theorizing Queer in Post-Apartheid South Africa" in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities* ed by Delroy Constantine-Simms, 2000, NY: alyson books

Vaneshree has tried to broach the topic of her sexuality with her mother on another occasion. She and Fikile along with a few other LGBTQI activists appeared on a TV discussion programme called 'The Big Question'. The discussion was on lesbians and gays and religious perspectives of marriage. Vaneshree phoned her mother to tell her that she was going to be on TV and that she should watch. That day it hit home for Durga that her daughter was a publicly out and proud lesbian. The fact that her mother cannot accept her life bothers Vaneshree and it is clear she feels ambivalent almost indifferent towards her extended family.

***'Was I closeted? Well I wasn't closeted with my friends but I never said it. And no one asked.' - Jameela's Story***

### **Homosexuality in the Struggle**

Jameela left Marabastad to broaden her horizons. As she stated she left home to get a political as well as scholarly education. She enrolled to study a BA Law degree and got involved with student politics. She joined the United Democratic Front (UDF) and it is within this organisation that her political awareness and activism grew. This was the first time Jameela felt as if she belonged to something powerful. She found many like minds in the UDF, it was here that she had found her community. Jameela met people that related to her Black Consciousness philosophy. For Jameela her comrades were her family of the 1980's, and while the struggle environment was subversive with regards to racial politics in terms of gender and sexual politics the

environment was conservative<sup>105</sup>. It was difficult if not almost impossible for many activists to come out as gay in the movement.

There were comrades challenging heteronormativity but on the whole sexuality and particularly homosexuality was not discussed within liberation movement. Your same-sex desires or homosexuality was something that could be used against you in the movement. The security forces would threaten people with blackmail and get them to become *impimpi's* for the state because of their sexuality<sup>106</sup>. Therefore when sexuality was discussed within the movement many adopted a 'reactionary' stance. The 'homosexual' was seen to be counter-revolutionary.

The politics of the liberation movement thrust one aspect of identity into the forefront, arguably this was needed to represent unity in struggle however, we, cannot ignore how issues of race, gender, class, sexuality and religion intersect<sup>107</sup>. Therefore within the struggle issues of gender, race, class and sexuality were sidelined because it was believed that if we engage with the inherent diversities of people the notion of unity might be compromised. In actual fact it is the opposite, if we continue to view people and places as homogenous and fixed we are likely to infringe on personal freedoms, and provide the ammunition for practices such as ethnic cleansing as we demarcate and classify for political gain.

Now how did I see myself then? I think I definitely saw myself as gay there's no question about that. Though there was a question of what *kind of* gay person I would be. Was I closeted? Well I

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105 See Simon Nkoli and other Black gay activist writing that tackle this issue of homophobia within the liberation movement in the books *Defiant Desire* and *The Invisible Ghetto: Gay and Lesbian Writings in South Africa*.

106 An ex ANC cadre who I spoke recently informed me that the head of his cell was gay and everyone knew but no one said anything, which made it difficult for the guy and he would suffer from bouts of depression because he couldn't deal with his activism and homosexuality. He never allowed himself to act on his same-sex desires.

107 See Amin Maalouf *On Identity*, 2000, and Amartya Sen *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, 2004

wasn't closeted with my friends but I never said it. And no one asked. Because we were activists together and no one really tackled the sexuality issue.

According to Reid and Morgan 'A central dilemma of homosexuality in Africa is the assertion of an individual desire at the expense of collective, communal well-being.'<sup>108</sup> I suggest that this dilemma is present for any individual who feels aligned to a number different of communities. Black activists were faced with the dilemma of prioritising one identity over another<sup>109</sup>. Activists had to choose between being freedom fighters and being gay. By viewing homosexuality as a phenomenon foreign to Black culture(s), issues of heteronormativity within the movement and broader South African society were ignored. For the greater good of the 'cause', which manifested as the political liberation of the country from White rule, issues such as gender, sexuality, and class equity were sidelined. Jameela sees herself as an activist before a WLW as a result she had great difficulty in reconciling these aspects of her identity.

### Testing Sexuality

Jameela felt as if she had to choose between two mutually exclusive choices; being gay or being an activist, this led her to test her sexuality with men.

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108 Reid, G and Morgan R. "'I've got two men and one woman': ancestors, sexuality and identity among same-sex identified women traditional healers in South Africa". *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, Sep–Oct 2003 vol . 5 no 5 375–391. p386. As well as Gevisser, 1999, 'Homosexuality in Africa. An interpretation and overview of homosexuality in both traditional and modern African societies.' In K. A. Appiah and H. L. Gates (eds) *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*.

109 For more see Hein Kleinbooi "Identity Crossfire: On being a Black gay student activist". Feminist lesbians of colour such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde have also discussed this dilemma.

There wasn't a space, which allowed me to be an activist and gay at the same time. You know I was most despondent about that issue and I would test my own sexuality. And I'd say oh well here's a man that's interested in me let me see if that works, and real test is when you in bed, because when you expect this woman body and there's a man body, and you try and you try and you say, for me it was very clear I want to be somewhere else. It was not a test to deny my sexuality, it was a test to affirm it. Can I accept that I'm different and continue to live with my difference, which I accepted a long time ago but the, bearing of that difference, how I bear it in life, can I continue doing this? Can I assimilate into mainstream? So I would test it, and I, think the guys were very hurt and very offended.

Jameela tries to assimilate and adopt heterosexuality but she is unable to do so successfully. She tries to be with men but the real test for her is in bed, when she expects 'a woman body and there's a man body'. Jameela tests her sexuality because she was not sure if she could continue to bear this difference eternally. Was being gay worth all the drama? If there was another way, a 'better way' she might as well try it.

Gradually I allowed myself to assert my sexuality, without apologising for it. So the people that I worked very closely with had begun to understand that I was gay, I didn't have to tell them.

Jameela began to feel comfortable enough to express her sexuality freely with those closest to her. She did not advertise her sexuality nor did she hide her same-sex shamefully. When you know someone it includes the sum of their parts, you cannot be selective with the details, this is *who* they are. In activist circles those who were a part of Jameela's life understood that she loved women. With her family the situation was more complex. After living in Cape Town for many years she returns to Johannesburg. Jameela says that being away from home definitely

made living an openly gay life easy. Away from home she didn't have to engage with the family or community expectations and coming back home she was once again faced with the fact that she was living a life different from the norm.

According to Jameela her father's death liberates the women in her family. They no longer have to live their lives according her father's wishes. Jameela's father was not an autocrat but was in fact confined by cultural practices. Her father did what he was supposed to do, whereas Jameela challenged societal precepts and this resulted in conflict between the two of them. In the end it was clear that her father was proud of her. Jameela was successful in her life, therefore he felt that the 'the apple had not fallen too far from the tree'.

Jameela doesn't 'come out' to her family in so many words but they *know* and she didn't have to tell them. Jameela is able to talk candidly about her sexuality and relationships with her younger siblings; in fact her younger brother Feroz is also gay. Her mother knows about her sexuality without having to be told. She asks her other children about Jameela's relationships, and if she is in the 'know' she informs the others that 'Jameela is seeing so and so'. That is her way of showing her daughter that she knows, understands and supports her life.

***'When I called to tell her, she said she always knew'***

### **Preeti's Story**

Although she moved to Johannesburg to open up her dentist practice, Preeti said she knew on some subconscious level, that moving away from home would make it easier for her to live her sexuality freely. Living in Jozi she could avoid prying aunties' questions as to why she still was not

married. Preeti came from a rich high caste Gujarati family and it seems that there was a proposal waiting for her at every corner.

Although her sisters suspected that she could be gay they said nothing. Her sisters come to know about her sexuality without having to be told in so many words. They are very supportive because they just want Preeti to find love and be happy. Her father finds out about her 'homosexuality' from his other daughters. He dismisses it as a 'phase' she is going through, an attempt for attention. Preeti calls her biological mother in Australia and 'comes out' to her. Her mother says that she always knew that Preeti was gay, from the time she was a little girl. Preeti is relieved by her mother's disclosure and for a change she does not feel alone. Preeti felt that some knew who she really was. Her mother always knew, and she didn't love Preeti any less because of it. The mother is able to give the child peace.

### **The Politics of 'Coming Out' – A Comparative Analysis**

#### ***The Various Ways/Degrees of Being' Out'***

All of the women interviewed have 'come out' in some form or another. They are all comfortable with their same-sex desires. They do not try and hide their sexual orientation but as noted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick all gays and lesbians (even the most progressive) are to some extent intentionally in the closet for political, social or economic reasons. Being strategic about your sexuality means that sometimes you reveal your sexuality and other times you do not. Jameela did not feel that she had the space to talk about her sexuality within the anti-Apartheid political movement of the 1970's; there was pressure from the state and from ones comrades to remain secretive about same-sex desires. Because these relationships have been silenced they appear



invisible and this leads people to make such uninformed statements such as there are no Indian lesbians.

No longer looking for external approval they gradually all come to accept their same-sex desires. Feeling 'unapologetic' for their same-sex desires gave them the mental resolve to disclose their sexuality to their families. Because sexuality is a social relation, they all felt answerable to their families and communities with whom they felt aligned. Communities such as family units usually have members who have a shared status/experience of race, ethnic, gender and/or religion affiliations<sup>110</sup>. Therefore when you come out as gay, this is an identity you will experience separate from the members in your family. Hence coming out to one's family can be traumatic because it marks *you* separate from *them*.

### ***Maintaining Family Relations: Negotiating Difference***

Those who had good relationships with their families were able to negotiate and explain their sexual difference to their loved ones. Jameela's family realise that they have to allow for differences if they wanted to maintain their relationship her. According to Jameela's mother a tree without its roots has no foundation, rather than disown her daughter she was willing to accept that there is more than one way to love.

Out of respect for their families or by request they do not express their sexualities out in the open. Sexuality is considered a private affair, and more so when it is in apparent contravention with the 'natural' law as 'homosexuals' are. Vaneshree's mother warns her that if she wants to be 'gail' it must be privately, she must never declare her sexuality publicly. As noted by Matti Bunzl homosexuality is acceptable until you want the same rights and privileges

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110 See Amin Maalouf, *On Identity*. English Translation, Barbara Bray, 2000. The Harvill Press: London

afforded to heterosexuals<sup>111</sup>. Jameela chooses not to impose her sexuality on her family. She talks about her sexuality comfortably with her younger siblings but she feels less at ease with her older siblings. Although the forum is open if she wishes talk, she chooses not to because she has gotten used to keeping her private life, private. As a family unit they've learnt to accommodate difference rather than try to change the person. They give each other the space to be. This sense of neighbourliness, cosmopolitanism or just general good manners is what keeps communities together. You don't impose on people and they will return the favour, you find an acceptable compromise<sup>112</sup>.

Vaneshree's mother can't accept her daughter's life and partner. They have always had a strained relationship and currently they still relate with anger but their relationship is improving. There is a lot of emotional baggage that goes with relationships, especially life long ones forged not by 'choice'. It is difficult for Durga to disown her daughter even if Vaneshree is going against her wishes in such a serious domain. To avoid social scandal and keep ties with her last living relative, Durga continues to communicate with Vaneshree.

For Preeti what is important to her is creating a peaceful life without the drama and the anger she has grown accustomed to. Preeti is dealing with the troubles she experienced in her early years as a result her sexual orientation has given her little anxiety. She knew that her love was taboo but this is where she found sanctity amidst the chaos that was home. Like Jameela she doesn't hide her sexuality nor does she make it a public affair. For Preeti and Jameela their sisters are the first people who support them in their life's choices because they felt solidarity to their struggles.

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111 Matti Bunzl, *Queer Reading of Austrian (Homo)sexualities*. P217.

112 For example if your neighbour has a party till late with loud music you never complain even if you might be slightly annoyed because next time you will be the one having the party and your neighbour will give you the space to be.

The process of coming out is seen as a huge part of one's self-actualisation as a 'gay' person in society. Coming out signifies your entry or induction into the broader 'gay community' real or imagined, which you may or may not feel aligned to depending on your personal sexual politics. Whether you actively participate in the gay community or not, if you 'come out' it means that you identify with a group, it is an identity, a sexual identity and by extension a social relation. In the following section I will discuss each woman's personal sexual identity i.e. what label if any do they use to describe their sexuality.

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. - Franz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks*

## SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

According to Jeffrey Weeks (1991:11) historians of sexuality seek to 'understand the evolution and effects of historical interventions on individual erotic behaviour'. This means that our understanding of what we consider to be a 'sexual act' and what is considered 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' sexuality has a historical context<sup>113</sup>. You could include Foucault as he was the precursor in this style of argument. There are histories of sexualities, some written and some are not.

Sexuality is about politics, a product of its time and its social institutions. Sexuality is a narration of the body (bodily acts) in relation to the state, dominant economic models and now

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<sup>113</sup> Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1; An Introduction*, 1976, translated from the French by Alan Sheridan-Smith. Penguin/Tavistock Publications

more than ever global politics. Sexuality speaks to/about the family and the nation, intersecting and contradicting with issues of gender, class and race. Sexuality is about minority and majority politics, us and them, the foreigner and the native, power and intimacy. Sexual object choice has come to mean identity. Privately public, who we choose to love, fuck or have sex with is scrutinised to ascertain what *type* we are. What about the social context? Does it not play a more significant role than the state in policing sexual activity? Are the politics of sexuality limited to the relationship between the individual and the state? It is true that the state will pass laws about what is permissible or not but how far does this extend?

In this section I will discuss how each woman identifies with their sexuality i.e. how do they call themselves? What is their personal understanding of their sexuality and sexual politics and how does this intersect with current debates on same-sexuality in the country? Such questions will inform this section. Each woman has their own perspective on sexuality, however what is common between them, is that, they resist classification. According Amin Maalouf, with regards to identity we experience and enjoy 'allegiances of different strengths but none are insignificant'<sup>114</sup>. Preeti, Jameela and Vaneshree all assert that they are, and will always be, more than their sexual orientation. Departing from the structure of the previous sections, in the following section I will start with the overarching theme or question and incorporate their stories.

### ***What's in a Name? Women talking about their sexual identity***

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<sup>114</sup> Maalouf, A. *On Identity*, 2000. P76.

As noted before none of the women see their sexuality as the sole determining factor in their lives. When I asked Jameela how she describes her sexuality this is how she answered.

I would call myself a lesbian only if you pushed me to describe myself in terms of sexuality. But if you ask me to describe myself to you it wouldn't be the 1<sup>st</sup> thing. I don't sleep with men I sleep with women. And I enjoy my relationships with women and I feel closer to women. But if you wanna describe me beyond that. I don't see my sexuality as overwhelmingly describing me.

Jameela will call herself a lesbian but only if she is forced to, her sexuality is not her primary point of identification. She calls herself a 'lesbian' because she is a WLW; and women are her primary sources of reference and refuge in this world. She calls herself 'lesbian' because she has sex with women, and she likes how their bodies feel. But if you wanted to describe her as a person you would have to dig deeper because her lesbianism is only one aspect of who she is. How one views their sexuality is tied to their personal politics.

Vaneshree views her sexuality as a site for political resistance, by actively challenging heterosexual hegemony and gender conformity. She identifies with the feminist vision of lesbian. Fikile, given her LGBTQI activist background has exposed Vaneshree to sexual activism and sexual theory. Vaneshree is the only one who uses the term 'homophobia' which signifies a familiarity with LGBTQI discourse. In fact my first interview with her was held at the Equality Project, a LGBTQI organisation where Fikile worked at. Vaneshree does not identify with the label queer. Although she understands the political usage of the word queer in LGBTQI discourse, she does not identify with that label as it conflicts with her feminist views<sup>115</sup>. Vaneshree sees herself as a woman and she is aware of the difficulties that women face when they try and express

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<sup>115</sup> Queer seeks to challenge the binaries that are heterosexual and homosexual however this far reaching perspective does not suit everyone, especially not the feminists, who view certain sexual subcultures as antagonistic to their gender politics. In this regard the BDSM community has come under attack for perpetuating the eroticisation of unequal gender roles even if the sex is consensual.

themselves and their sexuality free from men. For Vaneshree the queer banner doesn't adequately address the inequalities that exist between the genders. Although Vaneshree has a strong lesbian identity she says that she is definitely more than her sexuality. She sees herself as a cultural being, looking to find ways of relating to her culture, tradition and religion in a manner that doesn't require her to denounce her lesbianism.

Preeti hasn't deconstructed and analysed her sexuality in the manner that Vaneshree and Jameela have. She did at some point question the morality of her desires but those were fleeting doubts, ultimately she just went with what felt good. Preeti sees herself as a woman but she is not willing call herself lesbian. She would describe herself that way if she had to but she does not 'call' herself anything. In our interviews she referred to herself as gay. According to Preeti if it was not for me and my research she would not have thought about her sexuality to this extent. She says that when she became comfortable with her sexuality it no longer occupied her headspace.

### ***Personal Politics***

Jameela feels that sexuality alone is not enough for her to feel connected to a person. Whenever she has gone to 'lesbian spaces'<sup>116</sup> she usually finds that she has little in common with the predominantly White crowd. In fact all of my respondents myself included have felt like outsiders at predominantly White girl parties (such as the Playground) in the suburbs of Johannesburg. For all three women most socialising is done with friends in their houses, their friends are 'straight', 'bisexual', 'lesbian' or 'undefined'. Over the years Jameela has been involved with many women, some identified as lesbian and some did not, some even continued to have

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<sup>116</sup> Gay clubs and lesbian parties.

relationships with men. Therefore for Jameela 'sexuality occupies that blurry area which is more than just sex' and we should resist placing people in neat boxes when life is far more complex and nuanced.

One of Jameela's driving forces was the pursuit of education. She knew that by educating herself she would equip herself with the necessary skills to be an independent woman. She was so determined to study that she would have 'stopped being gay' if it meant that she could attend university. For Jameela her personal<sup>117</sup> and political struggles were bigger than the quest for sexual freedom. If people are products of their time then one can understand why Jameela adopts this particular stance. Jameela was witness to many inequalities, and it was these injustices that planted the seeds of her political activism. Her understanding of politics or what is political is largely influenced by her involvement with UDF. The liberation movement rhetoric largely and wholly ignored issues of sexuality<sup>118</sup> and other matters of social importance (such as gender equity) to present a cohesive and consistent front of resistance. Therefore Jameela separates her politics from her sexuality. If identity is related to community, then one can understand why Jameela's sexuality identity is not at the forefront of her personal identity<sup>119</sup>. She was not able to disclose her sexuality to her community of comrades.

I don't wear my sexuality on my sleeve because I think that's primarily a private choice, with social consequences which I will fight for and which I have, I've put my time and energy fighting

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117 Jameela has struggled with various aspects of her identity and sexuality is just one aspect of her constantly changing rearranging sense of self in this world. For example when she was a teenager she denounced the category of Indian and saw herself as South African Black, in accordance with BCM ideals. Now the definition of Black is different and continues to change.

118 Nkoli, S, "Coming out as a Black gay activist in South Africa in *Defiant Desire*, Eds. Gevisser, M. & Cameron, E, 1994, Braamfontein: Raven Press

119 Amin Maalouf. *On Identity*, 2000.

for rights for people like myself and people who choose to be gay, and who can't be anything but gay or who are Black or who are foreign.

Jameela doesn't advertise her sexuality it something you enjoy quietly and privately it is not for public consumption. She does not feel as if she should explain her love to her world; heterosexuals don't have to so why should she? However Jameela is well aware that sexuality has social consequences. This is why although sexual activism is not at the forefront of her struggle, she is willing to fight for the rights of people who experience abuse as a direct result of their sexual orientation.

Jameela is a member of mainstream society socially and economically which is one of reasons why she feels that sexuality is not a battle which dominates her life. She is able to live a life of her own making, and she worked hard to ensure that. If she was a financially unstable lesbian she would be on the margins of society experiencing the full brunt of homophobia and misogyny, but being middle class she considers herself mainstream. This is because without material wealth all you have is your social capital,<sup>120</sup> therefore if you are ostracised and unsupported by your community you are likely to face brutality<sup>121</sup>. This does not detract from the homophobia or misogyny that lesbian women face in general, this is just to highlight the fact

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120 Your standing in the community and your relationship with your peers.

121 See Zanele Muholi's visual exhibition *The Rose has Thorns*. This work which is part of the overarching anti hate crime campaign documents the hostilities and abuse encountered by Black lesbians living in the locations who have experienced violence because of their sexuality. Because of limited resources, often Black lesbians find little recourse in the law, many women continue to live amongst their rapists with no protection. Most recently a 19 year old Black lesbian was beaten to death *eKhayelitsha* by a mob of men because she was accused of being u 'stabane' a derogatory term for lesbian. All of the women interviewed made sure they were financially independent, this enabled them to move away and create their own communities.



that we all occupy varying positions of power in any given setting<sup>122</sup>, and that often it is impoverished lesbians who experience homophobia at its worst<sup>123</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Tracing the historically trajectory of homosexuality in South Africa we can see how homophobia has become entrenched in the national culture and psyche. While same-sex relationships existed in Southern Africa before the arrival of the White man most historical accounts view homosexuality as a White import. When one could argue that the real import is homophobia.

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122 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

123 See Zanele Muholi's article on how the legal system and LGBTQI organisations fail to make a difference in the lives of poor and working class lesbians. <http://www.few.org.za/News/Nobody.htm>

Under the Apartheid regime homosexuality is only considered an issue when it 'afflicted' White men. If Black men were exhibiting 'homosexual behaviour' the state did not care because it meant that their White women were safe from a virile Black sexuality. When sexuality was written about by those challenging the system their all consuming Marxist stance rendered all forms of same-sex love a sickness resulting from the racialised capitalist system, Apartheid.

If the country was separated along racial lines so was the LGBTQI movement. White gays felt pressure from the state and they were careful not to align themselves with any revolutionary factions<sup>124</sup>. On the other end it was difficult for Black people to come out as gay especially if they were political activists. Being gay was considered counter revolutionary. Black activists who were gay and other gays and lesbians in the townships banded together to form their own organisations that would adequately address the issues that they faced. Still today it is evident that there is split in the LGBTQI movement along colour lines. Therefore because of the history of the LGBTQI movement which is inextricably linked to the history of our country many Indian, Coloured and Black women do not feel aligned to the LGBTQI movement in Johannesburg, and especially so if they are working class<sup>125</sup>. Although under our current political dispensation your right to freedom of sexual orientation is entrenched legally, many WLW do not feel those gains. There is great societal pressure to conform to gender and sexual norms, this is especially true in the Indian community where great emphasis is placed on marriage as a rites of passage.

As a result of the Group Areas Act of 1950 the landscape was reorganised racially creating insular ethnic enclaves away from the vibrancy of the city centre. Spaces such as Lenasia in the then Transvaal was constructed as an Indian area. The space was defined as Indian, and in

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<sup>124</sup> In fact in what has become quite a notorious and embarrassing story for the Kevan Botha, a leading LGBTQI activist, he at one point wrote a letter denouncing the political activities of Simon Nkoli who was in prison awaiting trial. He declared that Nkoli and the rest of the Delmas trialists were terrorists and that the gay movement South Africa did not want to be associated with Nkoli was a member of GASA.

<sup>125</sup> Although with the inception of organisations such FEW (For Empowerment of Women) who focus their attention to issues facing Black lesbians in the townships this one sidedness in the movement is being challenged

turn Indian identity is tied to the space, as noted by Lefebvre, space gives meaning to people. This notion of Indians as a homogenous collective ignored the social differentiation amongst them (Ebr.-Vally, 2001:27), and propelled one possible point of identity affiliation above all others. We come from a history where our movement has been restricted and space as well as sexuality is linked to race.

Indians are constructed as fiercely cultural beings with linguistic and religious connections to the sub-continent. Notions such as marriage, honour, and respectability are important facets of Indian identity. Worrying about getting people talking, due to your social/sexual transgression is the way the community is able to pressure its members to conform. Sexual transgressions (such as a child out of wedlock) reflect badly on your family. The family which is unanswerable to the broader community has to account for your action, as you bring disrepute to the family name. Marriage is the only socially sanctioned space for women to express their sexuality, and usually it is tied to reproduction. Women are expected to know their place in the home.

This thesis asked the question: **How do Indian WLW negotiate 'invisibility' and 'silence' and under what circumstances do they 'make' and live their lives?** I wanted to inform myself in this regard because growing up in Lenasia I noticed that if you cannot read the signs, WLW were not visible. This is very different from claiming that there are no Indian lesbians, instead I was interested in the societal factors at play that renders this form of love 'invisible' on the Johannesburg landscape. I wanted to know how Indian WLW able to circumnavigate the system carving out their own sexual spaces, given the taboo that exists around such relationships.

Indian WLW do exist but many choose to live their sexualities outside of the public gaze, as transgressing social sex mores means dealing with negative vibrations from the community.

Indian WLW who are socially and economically independent are often inclined to leave the township space to explore their sexuality in the city, away from their communities. This is not to say that sexuality is the sole reason for leaving the township but rather it is one of many factors encouraging the move. The family and community are able to exert less social pull outside of the geographic space called home. Women who conform to gender performances are able to pass as heterosexual, for those who appear 'butch' it is more difficult, as often gender performance is linked to perceptions of sexual orientation. All of the women interviewed were able to pass as straight; their heterosexuality is assumed unless they declare otherwise. Rather than transgress social norms publicly it is safer to do so privately and secretly.

Speaking to the women about their first sexual thoughts and encounters shed light on many issues facing WLW. All had to engage with the all imposing heterosexuality present in our in society. Because of this heteronormativity they all felt that their first sexual thought or encounter with another girl or woman was 'wrong'. Even if sexuality is not a popular topic of discussion Preeti Jameela and Vaneshree all know 'right' sexuality from 'wrong' sexuality. When Jameela first thought about being with another girl she knew that what she was feelings was not mainstream sexuality and that she could face hostility if she expressed her desires publicly. They all thought about their sexuality and the implications of loving another woman in the society we live in. They were all aware of their sexuality as a social relation, with status. They were 'different' and this 'difference' was not equal.

Preeti, Jameela and Vaneshree all felt split between what was expected of them as women and what they wanted to do. It was assumed that they would ideally marry middle class men of a similar age/race/religious group and with the intention of procreation. As 'good Indian girls' this was the life that was laid before them. But being critical they soon began to question societal precepts and they noticed the inherent contradictions that exist within the system and

society. They saw that often marriage was not a blissful institution. Often people feel forced into their respective roles and responsibilities as husband and wife and this leads to deceit and discontent. People close to them (such as parents and siblings) were unhappy because they were not living lives on their own making. For Jameela, Vaneshree and Preeti the robotic existence of their mothers and aunts was a fate worse than death, they would take matters into their own hands and take charge of their destiny.

But ensuring ones personal and therefore sexual autonomy is not an easy process. It was clear for each woman that because of the skewed gender relations between men and women in their families and communities, they would have leave home and acquire a skill, to ensure their social and financial independence from their fathers and future husbands. They all saw education as the key to freeing themselves from external control, be it familial or societal. In Jameela's time few women received university education, Preeti who is younger was able to attend university despite the obstacles placed by her father, and Vaneshree who is the youngest had no problem getting to university. This shows the changing societal attitude with regards to 'women's work'. Leaving home to get educated was an acceptable compromise. A struggle the broader community could relate to.

Knowing that their desires ran in opposition to the norm they all strategise to mobilise silence for their protection. Preeti, Jameela and Vaneshree, decide not to disclose their sexuality immediately. They used silence to afford them the time and space to think about their sexuality without external premature intrusion. This silence offers a useful veil as they are able to 'move around' undetected. In our society where attraction is based on difference, Preeti, Jameela and Vaneshree were able to conduct their relations outside of the heteronormative view under the guise of 'friendship'<sup>126</sup>. It was socially acceptable for them to bring girls home and sleep in the

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126 As feminine women they were all able to pass as straight.

same bed but this behaviour would never have been allowed with someone of the opposite sex. However because they experienced their relationships silently their early same-sex relationships were nullified and non-existent in societal eyes. Considering that sexual relations are social relations it is very difficult to exist in this state of silence, or not saying, because this very silence which is able to cocoon and protect their relationship, relegates their love to the realm of 'none existence'. By not talking about their relationships with their lovers and their family they nullified their valid and viable arrangement. Jameela and Fatima could not talk about their relationship, it was a 'given' that it would not work. It is easy to have a sexual and emotional relationship with a woman but it is far more difficult to 'come out as 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'homosexual. Fatima felt pressure to conform to societal precepts and even if she knew that she loved Jameela she was not able to deviate from the path traced for her.

What Vaneshree, Preeti and Jameela have in common is that they were able to come out and claim their sexual freedom. By coming out I mean that they were able to steer their own lives, they exercised their personal autonomy. Living in a society that places so much emphasis on 'appearing normal' (to maintain social status) they had to fight for their own rights because no one was going to do it for them. Gradually they became unapologetic about their sexuality and they disclose their sexuality in some form or another to those around them. They 'come out'<sup>127</sup> to themselves and those around them, but always they are careful to be strategic about the contexts in which they disclose their sexuality. People are perpetually stepping outside of the closet because heterosexuality is assumed, in every new social situation they will be faced with the question 'to disclose or not to disclose?'

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127 Defined as 'the process of acknowledging our self-identification with a particular sexual orientation and disclosing this understanding and acceptance to other people. Such people could include close relatives, close friends, peers or even colleagues.' Published by The Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre, Compiled by Jacques Livingston, Personal Counselling & Support Groups Project Coordinator.

Preeti Vaneshree and Jameela are all 'out of the closet' in some way or another. Preeti did not have to tell her sisters they just knew. Preeti suspects that her older sister might have known from the time of her relationship with Oshun but they never discussed it. She 'comes out' to her mother in Australia, her mother says that she always knew. Vaneshree 'comes out' to her mother in a very dramatic fashion. Durga's reaction is even more dramatic because she was totally winded by this frank talk. She didn't even know the word gay. If relationships between people are good<sup>128</sup> it was easier to bridge the gap of that difference, the view of 'she's like that but we know her'. This is also evident when we see how tolerant society is of the sexual transgressions of pop stars.

By ignoring the fact that heterosexuality is deeply ingrained in our culture and its institutions we reduce sexuality to individual choice. As noted by all of my respondents, none of them *chose* to be gay they just were, also being gay 'is not all that they are about'. We are the sum and more of our parts. Instead of removing sexuality from those 'broader' issues we should be including perspectives that use the lens of sexuality as a tool for social analysis. It is important to acknowledge that not every WLW views sexuality as a site of resistance. Some people choose to remain undefined, this complicates issues of visibility, as to a large extent visibility is intrinsically tied to notions of coming out, to be visible implies identification with some community.

Sexuality is interpreted, understood and felt uniquely by each individual. I would say that sexuality occupies a different space in the lives each of the women interviewed. We cannot begin to claim that we can understand all that is desire because the experience of life is to a degree, mystifying. However given that sexuality is a social relation we can try to understand issues of sexual identity. Jameela will call herself 'lesbian' if she is forced to choose. Preeti sees

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128 They understand each other, they can communicate, they have shared moments of intellectual, emotional together

herself as 'gay' and Vaneshree will proudly say that she lesbian but don't call her queer. They choose different labels because they have different politics. Jameela doesn't view sexuality as her first point of reference or as a site of activism. Often sexual activism is dismissed as a middle class wile. Preeti does not see her sexuality as a political affair it is something done privately behind closed doors. Vaneshree sees herself as a sexual activist therefore she seeks to challenge heteronormativity, and being a proud and vocal lesbian is one way in which she challenges the system.

Sexuality is seen as something that is private yet it is clear that is far from that, publicly private, sexuality is everyone's concern. People are willing to be tolerant [aware] and critical of racial issues due to the political climate we hail from, but seem rather unwilling to challenge the heterosexual hegemony that exists. They were all adamant that there was more to them their sexuality, and this is the truth. To talk about their sexuality alone is to brush the surface of their lives because as much as they love women that is not their sole identifier. They identify with many struggles and allegiances. Therefore if we intend on challenging heteronormativity and all other social institutions which diminish and hinder the quality of living by restricting personal freedoms, with capitalist, homophobic, religious, and cultural discourses, we must resist homogenous classification and seize personal autonomy. Life is diverse and the personal is political.



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