



Oppressor and Oppressed: Rethinking the Binary

Jasbir Puar Discusses Domestic Violence

Narika was founded in Berkeley in 1991 to aid South Asian battered women. **Jasbir Puar** was a board member from 1995 to 1998, as well as a volunteer and consultant on the Youth Outreach Project through June 1999. She spoke to **Munia** in March 1998 about addressing questions of same-sex domestic violence in South Asian communities through Narika.

M: Tell me about Narika's same-sex initiatives and how you got to that place.

J: Several years ago we tried to put together a support group for South Asian women. We had long discussions about language: in the end we said it was for lesbians, bisexuals, questioning f2m transgendered persons and women who love women. We didn't get any calls during the time the advertisement ran. My goal was to basically have this space that Trikone didn't seem to be really addressing. My sense of why the group didn't come together is that the kinds of communities we live in need different kinds of outreach. We started, for example, doing outreach at Bhangra gigs and at straight, queer, and mixed events. HIV/AIDS organizations generally do this kind of outreach, but not queer domestic violence organizations, whereas South Asian domestic violence organizations might focus on tabling at cultural events. So we kind of hybridized the approaches and it was very successful.

M: What other kinds of outreach are needed?

J: It's precisely because this kind of support group does ghettoize the issue that it feels manageable. The real challenge is to go beyond this kind of group. It makes more sense to do issue-based activities to get women involved. We need to make sure everyone is accountable for sexuality, not just queer people. One way is to start linking up how all abuse against women has something to do with queer sexualities. Any kind of rejection of conventional gender roles, whatever that might mean in a particular context, is going to be punishable vis-a-vis violent behavior.

So there's an important connection between gay bashing and domestic violence. Gay bashing is often thought of as a public, visible event, that happens to "obviously" gay subjects such as effeminate men or butchy women. This narrow conceptualization only erases the kinds of violence women suffer within their homes away from the public face, often because they are attempting to transgress gender and sexual "norms." While butch women may be the obvious visibilized targets for attack, femme women, those who may be accused of passing, are actually always on the edges of visibility. The moment they refuse their heterosexual mandate they subject themselves to a potential attack, the accusation of lesbianism as betrayal comes forth. It's not only because femmes are perceived as passing as straight and should not be, but that they are also perceived as passing for lesbian, that's what becomes intolerable. Certainly rape should be seen as queer bashing.

Domestic violence organizations also deal with calls from women who are leaving their husbands to be with another woman. The general backlash against an increase in gay and lesbian visibility, which does not indicate a decrease in the prevalence of homophobia in society, suggests another connection, between queer visibility, coming out, and domestic violence. While there needs to be specific same-sex domestic violence training, we also need to create training that is applicable across a range of situations. So when a same-sex domestic violence call comes in, everyone doesn't just automatically call me because I'm queer. (Laughter.)

M: You're saying that Narika, when dealing with queer domestic violence, also needs to deal with gay bashing and other violence against queers?

J: Yes, absolutely, but also the other way around. The assumption of sexuality should always be present as an issue, and I don't mean sexuality as in homosexuality or not. Just that the domestication of one's gendered and sexual self is at the core of violence against women whether that woman is lesbian or queer-identified or not. These issues need to be seen in a constellation of the ways that women are punished for having more active decisions around their bodies.

These days Narika is shifting from a primarily first generation South Asian volunteer organization to one more mixed with second-generation. As such the issue of arranged marriage is increasingly brought up, as something second generation women struggle with. In the focus on this struggle it becomes quite easy to discuss arranged marriages without talking about normative heterosexuality or different alternative sexual and kinship arrangements. And that's a tendency we have to refuse. If we can do that it makes everyone think twice about what sexuality means to them, and how sexuality is and is not domesticated through practices of arranged marriages, whether the struggle is to be able to date men of their choosing or date women or choose to be single or not raise children, or whatever. Second generation South Asian women may have a tendency to distance themselves from their mother's situations, especially if their mother had an arranged marriage in South Asia. They may see their freedom from arranged marriages in a way that prevents them from really acknowledging abusive situations in their own relationships. I think these tensions also make discussing same-sex issues tough. The fear, on both sides, is often that lesbianism is seen as Americanized. This is reductive of course and does a disservice to everyone, while at the same time making it difficult to differentiate homophobia from people simply having different cultural, historical, and locational understandings of sexuality.

M: How do you deal with community gossip, being both an activist and a community member?

J: We need to situate "gossip" as situational, contextual and informative, not just as always damaging. Do we then support practices of outing batterers by plastering their names on bathroom walls and sidewalks? Our communities can be very, very, small, but the assumption of the insularity is also misguided. We've gotten calls from people who don't entirely circulate in the spaces of identity politics, for example, from Indian women in same-sex relationships who don't identify as a lesbian, nor as South Asian. One caller talked about her relationship with another Asian woman, but didn't qualify her relationship as a same-sex relationship. It was simply a relationship. When we are counseling on the phone, it's really difficult to negotiate language at that point. It's really important to learn how to use the hotline in a gender-neutral way, not only to give queer women a place to call that's attentive to queer issues, but also to let our heterosexual callers know that we are open to discussing same-sex sexuality with them.

M: How likely is it that a queer South Asian women would call Narika?

J: It's already stigmatized to be in a queer relationship; who wants to admit, on top of that, that it's also an abusive one? Many of the same forces are in play that prevent straight women from calling... shame, humiliation, embarrassment. The fact that we tend to all know each other, the smallness of our communities tends to make it harder to disclose, not easier. Many of us suffer from this assumption that because we are involved with the same sex our relationships will be more egalitarian. Of course we know this is not true and we need to deal with power in all our relationships.

Access to services is a huge issue; Narika is seen as predominantly heterosexually oriented, unfortunately. There's often the added burden of families not knowing about the queer relationships. Often the threat of being outed to one's family is as powerful as the threat to report someone to the INS for deportation. It's also a really tricky thing to counsel same-sex domestic violence callers. When a woman calls we assume that she's the survivor of violence. But I've been involved with many cases between two women where it's hard to discern who is the perpetrator and who is the survivor. It is absolutely necessary to understand that mutual battering is something different. But I think it is much more anxiety provoking for us to have a discussion about complicities that may make acts of violence harder to pinpoint. Part of that is due to the way the domestic violence movement has really polarized the positions of men and women in the understanding of who's oppressed, who's oppressor dichotomy.

M: Absolutely.

J: In that binary, women are not supposed to have power, much less abuse it. To acknowledge how women are actively complicit in their situations does not necessarily give them any more power or control to change their situations, nor does it ever, ever, put the blame on them. It might appear that these complicities seem more complicated between women than between men and women, though I don't think that they are.

In my experience with different queer communities in the Bay Area and in England, I have seen two violent women in a relationship both claiming to be battered, not to mention a case where a queer woman was the batterer in one relationship, and battered in another. Quite often the assumption that the butch partner, or the more masculinized partner is the one perpetrating the violence does not hold true. So if the assumptions carried from heterosexual domestic violence to queer domestic violence in terms of power, size, masculinity, misogyny, even aggression, don't work in the same way, then it actually points to problems with how we've conceptualized heterosexual domestic violence. It forces us to ask certain questions: Is it different when a woman is abused by a woman rather than a man? What ways do women abuse power differently than men, and in what ways are they similar? Most people have no problem conceptualizing men beating up on each other, so it's cast off as "men fighting." That's one kind of representational struggle one deals with. Whereas women wind up being cast off as having "dyke drama," which is another problem, because dyke drama is a form of violation, certainly, if not violence.

M: What is the importance of addressing same-sex domestic violence on the mainstream battered women's movement?

J: One thing I could add would be the question of the usefulness of shelters. Battered women's shelters have been critiqued by everyone from Indian activists who use more community-based forms of intervention, to European activists who use transitional housing models. Shelters may recreate the kinds of secrets, restrictions on mobility, familial dynamics, and isolation that a woman has just attempted to leave. Using shelters as an organizing logic of refuge tends to reinforce the victim status of the survivor and focus on "rescuing". Of course they are often times the only resort, so we work with it.

For queer women, their female batterers obviously also have greater access to shelters and hence can easily track down their partners. These situations suggest the need for alternative arrangements, such as a network of queer community safehouses. This gets the community involved and educated in a more proactive manner. It shifts accountability from a series of individuals who are social service providers to a network of community members. It also radically rewrites the space of the domestic, queers it, because it rethinks the structure of the family, the function of a house, and the kinship patterns that are normally assumed to fit into that house.

In terms of thinking about a collective queer community response, we need to think about what kind of support we are willing to give batterers. Often people object to this line of inquiry, saying that if the perpetrator were a straight man, we wouldn't think twice about policing him and keeping him away from certain spaces. The question then is, what makes some of us think twice about whether we should provide support to queer perpetrators? What different visions of community building do we want to encourage, and does that perhaps mean that we provide support for everyone involved in cases of battering? My dream would be to see a diasporic community response system that uses all the community networks that we already have in place to address both batterers and survivors.

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