“NOTHING MUCH HAPPENED”:

RETHINKING HETEROSEXUAL MIDDLE CLASS
ADOLESCENT BOYS’ ROMANCE IN MUMBAI

Introduction

Academic scholarship hasn’t engaged seriously with adolescent love and romance. ‘Good’ adolescents are required to not participate in the idea of romance and relegate it to an ambiguous later phase of life. If adolescents aren’t citizens yet, they are also not desirous subjects. The adolescent subject is denied citizenship on various fronts – by the State, medical institutions, the family, and educational institutions. The only discourses within which adolescent subjectivity is spoken about are those of protection, consumption and risk. The new law under the Criminal Amendment Act, 2013, has raised the age of consent from sixteen years to eighteen years of age, demonstrating a protectionist approach. Feminists have argued against this raising of age of consent. The neo-liberal economy constantly interpellates adolescents into being desirous consumers and as I will see later, romance and sexuality in post-globalisation urban India is intimately tied to consumerism.

In the previous chapter I had discussed the discourse of pleasure and desire in English language sexuality education materials, especially those produced in Mumbai. I had noted how the risky ‘reparative’ reworking of the concept of ‘true love’ shows us the possibility of addressing the ‘missing discourse of love’ in sexuality education. In this chapter I would like to think further about the discourse of pleasure and love by examining narratives of young men reflecting on their adolescent romantic and sexual lives. This will allow me to understand the nuances of male adolescent romantic lives as well as conceptually think about sexuality education.

Romance amongst middle class urban adolescent boys is viewed by schools, teachers and parents as either not serious – as ‘puppy love’ – or as ‘dangerous’, thus a reason for moral panic. In the former case, romance is equated to a ‘bubble that will burst’ and in the latter it is viewed as having a disastrous spiralling effect, where it leads to sex, and pregnancy and possibly STIs and STDs. However, my research shows that middle-class adolescents’ romantic lives are much more complex than they are made out to be. In this chapter, I draw on interviews with fifteen¹ heterosexual young men from Mumbai, between the ages of nineteen and twenty-seven years, reflecting on their adolescent romantic lives. This research

¹ The number is fifteen since the other five men are queer and this chapter focuses on male heterosexual desire.
sample is not representative of all men in urban locations. While the scope of this chapter is limited, what this research does however is to initiate a complex and nuanced debate on adolescent masculinities and romance. I critically engage with young people’s narratives about their romantic lives in an attempt to unsettle the discourse of adolescent love as puppy love and rethink gender relations. This allows me to examine adolescent masculinity outside of the limited and limiting discourses of “puppy love” which infantalises or moral panics which tend to demonise adolescent boys. In this chapter I specifically examine adolescent boys’ sexuality to engage with questions of masculinity and male sexual violence and ask: what are adolescent boys’ notions and experiences of romance and relationships? How do they experience crushes and rejections? What are the affective registers of romance for adolescent boys?

While discussions around pleasure in the context of sexuality education have rightly focussed on girls, Sharon Lamb (2014) raises the question of boys and their pleasures by noting: “the call for teaching about pleasure as embodied pleasure also presupposes that boys already have an embodied desire and have readily available discourses through which to make sense of desire. These discourses inform them that their pleasure is not problematic and quite possibly that they are less in need of education ... however, it ignores the content and quality of the discourses available to boys as a subject of investigation” (Lamb, 2014: 142-143). I explore how there is a lack of discourses available for boys to ‘make sense of their desire’.

I would like to engage critically with the assumption that boys experience pleasure and desire automatically and un-problematically. The young men’s narratives that I draw upon indirectly question ideas of the male predator, violent male, ideas of masculine romance as conquest, as well as ideas of the male who is only interested in penetrative sex within a heterosexual relationship. This is especially important in the post 2012 context where men are seen as predators. Some of the narratives also conform to notions of romance as centred around consumption practices. In this context, it is relevant to examine how neo-liberal discourses intimately shape certain middle class boys’ experiences and inabilities to engage in romantic relationships. In this chapter I examine adolescent male romance and consumerism, experiences and ideas of heterosexual romance and dating, sex in relationships, sex and romance, experiences of failure, crushes and uncertainty and romantic masculinity and failure. These, I argue, question our ideas of male desire and point to the limits of sexuality education. The chapter also draws upon a textual analysis of popular cinema in Mumbai over the last few years to think about adolescent male romance. Cinematic texts are used to build a context and to substantiate the narratives from the young men. There are also ruptures between cinematic imaginations of romance and narratives of young men in Mumbai. The
paper also draws from three cinematic texts: *Hunterrr* (2015), *Time Pass* (2014) and *Rockford* (1999) which represent adolescent males’ romance over the last two decades. I have chosen these texts because they represent adolescent male sexuality and romance empathetically and raise issues which are useful for my discussion here.

**Adolescent Boys’ Narratives of Heterosexual Romance, Relationships and Desire**

*Romance and Consumerism*

In this section I will examine how dating and romance are intricately tied to consumerism in public spaces by looking at narratives from the young men as well as drawing on existing literature on the topic in India and other contexts. Nitin talks about how neo-liberal ideas of romance become limiting since they restrict middle class boys from accessing what Brosius calls the ‘neo-liberal cake’ (Brosius, 2013: 257). Nitin recounts that:

A lot depended on how much money you had. Going to a club was something only 5-10% could afford. There was a Fire and Ice [Club] in Parel. And even if we went there we wouldn’t know what to do, we couldn’t relate to it, we didn’t know what we were supposed to do. Eating out meant eating at a roadside stall. [It] depends, it’s not like the lower classes didn’t go out, they did. Where could you go out with Rs 10 or 20? You take a bus have a vada pav. What can you do beyond that? Dating was strange. I didn’t think of myself as capable of dating until the 11th or 12th Std., didn’t know how to go to a disco, take a taxi back etc. All you could do is cycle in the colony, stop your cycle and talk to a girl. Say hi to a girl at a birthday party.

Vinay goes on to discuss how consumer practices were intimately tied to romance.

Dating involved at that age for us, kissing, chilling with that person all the time, going to a restaurant or café for a date or holding hands. Like you know how you see in the movies. Flirting and romance would be [done] in restaurants. If you are old enough you could go to your place [to kiss]. In the 10th or 11th you could go for a movie because it is dark inside. [Or go to] Carter Road, parks, [Bandra] Bandstand, Marine Lines. [Give] flowers, cards, or making something for her. Girls would give gifts. [The] guy would get flowers. Guys would [give] more [gifts]. Girls would give [gifts to the guy] on Valentine’s day or his birthday.

Krishna talks about the spaces to romance for the middle classes in the suburbs of Mulund. He discusses how newer malls were just coming up in those suburbs and that they became spaces to hang out and romance. Since Krishna and his friends were middle class, he discusses the lack of access to many of these spaces and how gardens and hills became spaces for romance too.

Eating out in restaurants was not popular...we were not that big to take a bus, to the station. We didn't have time. We came to the mall, once in a while because it was close. We also had a problem to get money, get a rickshaw, have four people [in a rickshaw] buy chips. [We] managed...Boys and girls used to go to eternity mall and Cinemax. That is when in Thane
[the] multiplex was [coming up]. [The] Mall was a big thing. Casel mill garden was a lover's spot; still is. And in Mulund [there was] Yogi hill.

Prakash, who comes from an affluent family discusses how dating involved movies and dinner only. This was a way for the couples to get to know each other better.

If they are friends then it is easier, then they would go out for movies and dinners, nothing beyond that. [For those] who knew each other it was easier. Those who didn't they would try to get them to know.

Saras also talks about consumerism and romance, but he discusses some of the ways in which his friends by-passed mall spaces to find other spaces to romance and have a sexual encounter. Movie halls though remain the most common spaces to kiss, and Saras’ narrative points to the ‘after-life’ of a date, where friends are far more interested in only knowing whether the couple kissed or not. Here Saras talks about different spaces to have a sexual encounter in Mumbai.

Ketaki- What would they do on a date?

Saras- Talk about if they made out. Movies, trip to a place, lunches. People didn't talk about lunches, mostly movies. People would go to the temple premise and behind the hill, and hang out there. [They were] not going to malls. People still go there [behind the hill], the younger people, that is where they go to make out, sometimes [they make out] in empty streets. One guy was caught in a girl's house terrace and they were making out. It was foolish to go there, there are plenty other places to go.

Ketaki- If the friends were in a relationship, what would they talk about?

Saras- They would tell everything, they went where, saw the movie, describe the movie, we were only looking for that part, so we didn't listen to most of it. They said that they kissed during the song, then again they kissed, and made out. We were there for that only. We didn't want to hear the rest, only what they did.

Ayan discusses how his peers’ idea of romance was centred on candle light dinners. Unlike them, his experience has been different since he and his girlfriend would just sit in the hallway or on the stairs and chat.

I don't know, the idea of romance we had...just go on a date with a girl, candle light dinner. When I had the relationship in [the] ninth standard, we used to just hang out in school, [while] my friends used to play. [We] used to just sit on the stairs, in the hallway and talk.

In these diverse narratives one notices how class plays an important role in determining which kind of spaces in the Mumbai adolescents access to romance or have a sexual encounter with their partner. While there is not much research on spaces of romance in cities in India, a multimedia project called Agents of Ishq², has done a brief survey on the most popular locations for people to romance and display affection towards each other publicly³. The

---

² The company is started by Mumbai based feminist filmmaker and columnist Paromita Vohra.

survey asked people to write in with their ‘most popular #PDA locations’. The survey got 144 votes from people in different cities, and the results indicated that cinema halls were the most popular at 37% followed by parks at 26%, seaside/lakeside at 15% and stairways at 22%. Many of my respondents too mentioned how cinema halls were the most preferred spaces to kiss their partners.

Christian Broius’ (2013) discussion on greeting cards examines the links between liberalization, consumer culture and romantic love. Brosius suggests that “for the first time in postcolonial India, romantic love became part of a rhetoric of a seemingly unrestricted way of life in which decision-making is allegedly based on two people in love with each other. Here, it seems that relationships and lives of ‘ordinary’ people are invested with the ‘right’ for such personal desire, pleasure, consumption, and fun” (Brosius 2013: 256). It is not that ideas, representations and lived experiences of romantic love have not existed earlier, but that romantic love post-liberalization acquires new meanings, one which is connected to consumption and ideas of individual choice and freedom.

Alexander et al write about ‘pre-marital’ romance and sex among youth in urban and rural slums between the ages of 15-24 in Pune district. Their findings indicate sexual relationships and romance among adolescents and young people in rural and urban Pune. But for a large number of women, sex is often through persuasion or coercion and there is little use of contraception. In the following quote, the authors discuss the spaces in which romantic couples met. These are often similar to the spaces that the young men talk about in Mumbai.

Meeting in a park, temple, bazaar, cinema, tourist spot and on public transport (bus, rickshaw) were reported in the pre-survey qualitative phase as typical of places where romantic partners met privately. But not all of those reporting a romantic partnership in the survey met alone in any of these locations (Table 4). Significantly more young men reporting a partnership had met their partners in one of these sites compared to young women. Urban youth likewise were significantly more likely than rural youth to have met in any of these locations. The qualitative findings suggest that meetings tended to be sporadic and opportunistic and frequently took place at the home of the girl or boy when other household members were absent. (Alexander et al 2006:149)

As I discussed in the introduction, most of the narratives around from the 1990s and first decade of 2000 does not discuss the use of mobile technologies. Many of the narratives and the questions that I pose here might be radically different today with the presence of cell phones and use of mobile applications like dating apps, Whatsapp and short messaging services.

Ritty Lukose (2009) discusses the skit that young women at a college at Kerala perform, and which represents a reworking of the popular nineteenth century novel Indulekha. In the skit, Lukose remarks, that “romance is not a wholly acceptable form of coupling; it marks a
discontinuous break, that between the space-time of tradition and the space-time of modernity. Public spaces of schools, hostels, parks and restaurants become particular sites for the possibilities and ambivalences of romance- a form of public intimacy. This traversal marks the temporal movement from tradition to modernity” (Lukose 2009: 111). The idea of ‘public intimacy’ is manifest in all the boys’ narratives of romance since many of the spaces that a city offers for romance are ‘public’.

The link between romance and consumption is also explored by various scholars in the West. Moira Weigel4 (2016) writes how romance and dating use economic metaphors because dating is intimately tied with the economy. Weigel (2016) writes a history of dating in the 20th century in the United States and explicitly ties it to the shifts in the economy. She links dating to the emergence of women in the public spaces, when women go to get jobs, and aspire towards upward class mobility. In *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Contradictions of Capitalism* (1997), Eva Illouz examines the cultures of love in the postmodern era. A central concern of the book is the relationship between romance and consumption, where “the romantic encounter [was relocated] to the public sphere of consumption: restaurants, movie theatres, and dance halls. By inscribing the romantic encounter into the consumption of leisure, the practice of "dating" marked the symbolic and practical penetration of romance by the market” (14). Elsewhere, Eva Illouz (2012) analyses love from a socio-historical perspective. She maintains that romantic love, modernity and consumerism are intimately intertwined today. Romantic love operates with the idea of individual, choice, autonomy and freedom. Similarly, Laurent Berlant (2012) argues how capitalism cannot “thrive without an attention to and constant stimulation of desire, which means that the centrality of romance and sex to its persuasive strategies creates subjects simultaneously primed for conventional intimacy and profit-generating relations to consumption and labor” (Berlant 2012: 108-109).

As all the interviews with the participants and the literature from various scholars have suggested, romance for adolescents – as well as for adults – cannot be extricated from consumption, the market, the economy and public spaces in the city. Along with discussions of consent, ‘safety’, choice and equality, we need to contend with the market too when discussing adolescent romance today. In the previous chapter I discussed how intimacies are often ‘mediated’ by psychologists and counsellors, through magazines and advice columns. Here, I note how intimacies are also ‘public’ and tied to consumption and the market.

Adolescent intimacies are not simply dangerous, pleasurable and ‘immature’; they are also ‘mediated’ and ‘public’.

Experiences of Heterosexual Romance and Dating

Adolescent boys’ heterosexual relationships are heterogeneous and occupy various typologies. Leena Abraham (2002) explores the “typologies of heterosexual peer networks” and identifies them as including “platonic ‘bhai-behen’ (‘brother-sister like’), romantic ‘true love’, and transitory and sexual ‘time pass’ relationships”. Her study is also based in Mumbai and examines the sexual and romantic lives of lower middle class college going young men and women. Her paper reveals the sexual double standards where promiscuous young men treat sexual intercourse with women—young women, older women/‘aunties’ and sex workers—as conquests, whereas for young women sexuality is deeply tied with questions of family honour, reputation and the fears of pregnancy. The typologies that Abraham introduces are interesting since it tries to understand the fluidity of romantic and sexual lives of young people.

Many popular films explore the tropes that Abraham discusses. For instance Hunterr (2015) narrates the story of a young man’s sexual relationship with ‘aunties’ and older married women. The protagonist Mandar Ponkshe’s masculinity is predicated on being a ‘player’, one who engages in multiple ‘time pass’ sexual relationships with women. As an adolescent boy, Mandar is not good looking, physically strong or rich— and not the hegemonic male in any sense of the term. But his ability to get a girlfriend— by using the motto of hitting on the ‘second best’ girl— makes him the most popular and sought after boy in school. Hunterr is not only a study of male sexuality but also tells us about the centrality of heterosexuality to masculinity. Time Pass (2014) explores the tropes of ‘time pass’ and ‘true love’. The lower class, lower caste protagonist Dagadu, egged on by his friends, is supposed to have a ‘time pass’ relationship with the Brahmin girl Prajakta, but instead falls in ‘true love’ with her. Along with Fandry (2014), and Sairat (2016), Time Pass also explores inter-caste, exogamous love.

While some of the young men I interviewed spoke about their friends treating romance as a means to sex, or of men who treat sexual relationships with women as conquests, none of the narratives of their lives revolved around the familiar tropes of male sexuality as predatory, or their attraction to women and girls as being ‘time pass’. In the following sections, I explore
the ways in which the young men deconstruct these familiar divisions of love and lust by talking about ‘deep emotions’, love and serious relationships with girls.

Jerry, who is in his mid-twenties at present, talks at length of the first girl he dated for a year when he was in the twelfth standard.

Jerry: I really liked this girl... [she] was actually the daughter of a family friend. So we’ve known each other. I had never really spoken to her after we had grown up. So when we started speaking- I [thought] I like this woman. Then I was deciding shall I do [something] about it, shall I not do [something] about it. She used to stay in Bandra and I used to study in Bandra. So I told myself if I see her today I will ask her out if I don’t see her today I won’t ask her out. So I walked, and I didn’t see her. I really wanted to do something. I didn’t meet her. I was like fuck it, nothing will happen. After lunch I was going home. But I wanted to call my mum that I am coming late. So I went to the PCO booth and guess whom I see at the PCO booth! So I met her and said I’ll walk you home, so I was walking her home, that is when the thing started. We dated for one year, I have yet to breach the one year mark. After that all my relations have been significantly shorter durations. While we were seeing each other, we weren’t seeing each other that much, because that was just before the prelim [exams]. I had board exams, so I didn’t meet her then. Sometimes I used to meet her… We would speak on the phone occasionally- we didn’t meet much. I told my parents and her parents also knew but they weren’t too happy because she was two years younger than me. … We used to meet, but not that much. I used to get to drop her home. But how much privacy do you get on the train? The thing is also you start to learn that being in a relationship is a complicated thing, it is not that you like someone and something happens and even if she says yes then something happens. But also it is about making do with the time and space you have.

Ketaki- Which spaces did you have?

Jerry- The college foyer. We only have public spaces which is why we pretty much did nothing. We used to sit and talk in the train. We would go in the afternoon to bus stops. That is why nothing really happened. Also that was the first relationship I was in, I didn’t know what the fuck to do! What am I supposed to do? I liked this girl, I told her, now what?... She was not a physically expressive person. We didn’t do anything physical… One of her friends asked me how do boys masturbate? ... I [told her] I watch porn. She said don’t tell me all this stuff. At that time, to be very honest, I was very happy holding her hand. Just sitting and talking to her was such a rare opportunity.

We spoke about all sort of things from books, to our interests, things happening in families, issues with parents, other people we knew, gossiping about friends. Sometimes, we would not say anything... Sometimes [we] share[d] music. I did invest in it pretty seriously. My parents didn’t really date much before they got married, so I had this idea that you know you find a person, you fall completely in love with them and then you spend the rest of your life with them. I don’t think that any more. I did like her. After we broke up, I was willing to get back after a year… That first one, I did invest a lot.

Jerry’s narrative subverts the notion of ‘puppy love’ as he talks at length of the investment in the relationship and the seriousness of it. He also questions the dominant notion of romance being a linear narrative- where desire follows a simple teleological line from crush, to dating to love. As Jen Gilbert (2014) says in the context of queer love: “From desiring women to worldly experiments in loving other women, there is no straight line- indeed, perhaps no line

---

5 While Jerry had crushes earlier and liked many girls, he only started dating by the time he was 17-18 years old and finishing school. The relationship spilled over into his college years.
at all”. (Gilbert, 2014: xvi). Jerry’s narrative questions this straight line and points to the complicated and messy feelings that love and desire are.

The idea that romance necessarily leads to sex is questioned in Jerry’s narrative since he talks about the lack of spaces he had for a sexual relationship. He doesn’t also express any desire to initiate a sexual relationship and in all honesty is happy to hold his girlfriend’s hand. His reason for not engaging in sexual intercourse has to do with his definition of a relationship rather than with the seriousness of it. Sexual intercourse is not really part of Jerry’s understanding of relationships. At the same time, his girlfriend plays the traditional role of the woman who acts as a gatekeeper to male sexuality by not being physically expressive and by chastising Jerry for talking about anything related to sex.

Jerry’s idea of dating one person and being with them forever reflects notions of what is popularly called ‘eternal love’, an imagination which we don’t traditionally expect men to be invested in. Jerry’s idea of what we might characterise as ‘eternal love’ upsets a gendered narrative of romance where girls want love and boys want sex. Vinay, who is twenty years old, presents a narrative very different from Jerry’s. Similar to Jerry, he also talks of a certain amount of ‘investment’ in his relationship.

Recently I liked a female a lot. She had a boyfriend whom she was dating for two years; she had a sexual relation with him. She was hiding it from me. I was cool with it. She asked me: are you angry. I said I’m cool with it. At that point of time I was dating. She said aren’t you annoyed, [I said] I’m cool with it, it is your life before me… She was quite surprised with that … we dated for 4 months. And then she realised she wants to get back with that guy. She dumped me. But she never got back with that guy. And she was like, I had a rebound and all that shit. I drunk dialled her a few times. I was embarrassed about it … She dumped me and I felt very bad and I still feel very bad.

Vinay’s narrative presents a back and forth confused story. Yet it is different from Jerry’s because it does talk of adolescents being in a sexual relationship. Unlike the assumption that sexual relationships among adolescents necessarily lead to pregnancies and other complications- run-away marriages and so on- Vinay’s narrative naturalises adolescent sexuality. Vinay’s girlfriend is also uncertain that he would accept her not being a virgin. This touches upon the anxieties that adolescent girls face with virginity. Vinay’s discussion of rebound, dumping, drunk dialling also delineates how adolescent romantic relationships can be short-lived and temporary, filled with confusion and embarrassment. But despite being short lived, Vinay doesn’t recount the romantic relationship as being ‘time pass’. Rather, Vinay’s expression of ‘feeling very bad’, of ‘liked her a lot’ indicates an emotional investment in the relationship, an emotion which we wouldn’t traditionally expect adolescent boys to express. Similarly, Prakash also talks about being serious in his relationship, about feelings, about being emotionally close to his girlfriend and the intimacies that he could
develop only with his girlfriend. This points to the lack of intimacies that boys share with other boys and how having a girlfriend is a way for boys to express their feelings and develop intimacy.

Prakash: I went out with a girl who was younger than me, we got to know each other... in school... When we had exams we used to sit side by side. When I was in the eighth standard, I realised that this girl existed. She was in my bus the whole time but I never knew that she existed. After that we got to know each other. I don't know how she knew one of my friends... we got really close. We weren't officially going out... we used to go for movies and shit... and that is about it... just close friends, not so close. We didn't officially go out, but it was technically the same thing, it was just the labels are different.

Ketaki: how does it become officially going out?

Prakash: we never asked each other, but we had feelings, we would openly discuss those feelings for each other, it was obvious.

Ketaki: were you serious?

Prakash: yeah.

Ketaki: what happened after that?

Prakash: we fought, that's about it. Then she moved, she went to the States.

Ketaki: how long was this?

Prakash: One and a half to two years. [The] first six to seven months you just got to know each other, it was good. It was someone you could talk to about everything. We weren't in the same class [standard]... from the people [in our class] we have an impression of how a person might be, so we had no impression of each other as such [since she was in another class]. We didn't know each other, and also I felt it was easier to talk to her about certain things than to guys. Lot of things were easier to talk to her. Like even from sexual relationships, at times I felt it was easier to discuss it with a girl than a guy, it is somehow always easier... more comfortable, to an extent.

Ketaki: did you learn things, or was it sharing?

Prakash: just getting to know. I knew it happens to people, it was easier to talk to her than a guy

Ketaki: What did being close mean?

Prakash: emotionally very close, not physically as such. We would discuss everything, literally everything.

Prakash discusses how the relationship developed slowly with time, how it was more important for him to talk about everything with his girlfriend and share with her his feelings. In his narrative one notices how a physical relationship is almost secondary to emotional intimacy. The fact that his girlfriend was in a different standard also helped since it created some mystery around the girl and he went about the relationship without any preconceived idea about her. Ayan also discusses how his first relationship was serious and how they loved each other. He describes the break up as difficult. Like Prakash he also talks about emotional closeness, deep emotions and love for his girlfriend.
Ketaki: Can you talk a little about the relationship you had in the ninth standard?

Ayan: Ya. I met her first time, then we became good friends, and we kind of started liking each other. After that, because I thought if I am really serious with her, do something. I don't know how to explain it, and we kissed. I kissed her. It went on for a long time. One year I guess. Then she had to go somewhere else to study and I was here. She was not from India. She was on student exchange… We always used to hang out. Everyone knew about it, the whole school knew about us. That time everyone knew who is dating whom.

Ketaki: how did it end?

Ayan: it became tough after some point. After some point it faded I guess. We didn't meet a lot. And then I had another crush. And she was like ‘it is very difficult for us, so let's just break it off’.

Ketaki: was it hard breaking off?

Ayan: yeah, because we really liked each other but it was really tough.

Ketaki: what were the feelings during that one year?

Ayan: I really loved her I guess. We had a mutual understanding, we had same interests. We were kind of childish so we used to just hang around play with other people and later on go out and eat something. We used to go to South Mumbai and eat something, walk around.

Ketaki: were you serious about it?

Ayan: at that time I was serious!

Ketaki: what she also serious?

Ayan: ya she was, she stayed with me for a year, so I am guessing she was. Mostly then in school when I had the relationship in ninth standard, we used to just hang out in school, my friends used to play, and me and her used to just sit on the stairs, in the hallway and talk. I don't know how to explain the meaning of love and romance... like I can just say one or two things. I loved her that's it. That was the only feeling; I don't know how to explain it.

Ayan’s narrative also explicitly points out how serious he was in his relationship and how difficult it was to break up. He keeps using the word ‘love’ and while he does talk about kissing once, the narrative focuses more on his feelings for her rather than their physical relationship. But this might not be true of everyone. Hari and Aditya, both affluent men from South Mumbai, discuss how their relationships during their adolescence were not serious. Hari describes other people’s relationships as serious but Hari has never been serious himself. While Hari isn’t committed to any of his girlfriends, he mentions that they were exclusive relationships. Hari who is eighteen years old at present narrates:

Hari: none [of the relationships] were very serious. Recently I have just had flings, [for a] couple of months, weeks, just having fun, no commitment.

Ketaki: And upto the tenth standard?

Hari: nothing serious, having fun, being with them. How do you explain it, you are exclusive but you are not like - not like complete serious relationship. It’s not like just going out having fun… we did not term it.

Ketaki: would you call that person a girlfriend?
Hari (drawling): yeahhh

Ketaki: that would mean going out?

Hari: ya, going out is a colloquial term. Dating and going out, it’s the same thing... [if] there are two people there, we would say they are going out; if he is talking to me, he would say I am dating.

Ketaki: were other people's experiences similar?

Hari: there were quite a few serious ones. They would go out for like around eighth and ninth grade and ended [it] recently. They were completely committed. They would be set for prom.

Hari also dwells on terminology and terms like ‘going out’, ‘dating’ and ‘girlfriend’. While none of the relationships were serious, he nonetheless calls them his girlfriends, does admit to ‘dating’ girls and also talks about his friends’ more committed relationships. Similarly, Aditya talks of real and un-real relationships. He specifically speaks from the vantage point of the present when he is an adult. From that point of view, adolescent romances are not serious. Like Hari, Aditya, who is also elite and affluent, does not talk about relationships with as much seriousness.

Ketaki: Did you have relationships before you were eighteen?

Aditya: yeah, but in retrospect I don't consider them relationships. I only consider one relationship. I don't consider them real or of some stature of any kind, I just think they were just dating for the sake of dating... The starting of the relationship as well as the breaking up was so uneventful I don't know how it can be called a relationship at all. At that time also I was [like ‘what is] this is nonsense’?

Ketaki: at that time what did you call a real relationship?

Aditya: a friend of mine did start dating someone at that time. That was a relationship- [it lasted] four-five years now. That is a relationship. Despite the periods of hell they keep going through, or long distance, short distance or moving around now they are both working, they still will never break up. Usually it was the novelty of having a girlfriend thing. But maybe, I am guessing one or two actually took it seriously. In retrospect I don't even know how anyone at that age could take it seriously.

Aditya believes that real relationships are those which stand the test of time, which last for a few years and which remain strong despite difficulties. He also speaks about the pressures of having a girlfriend and how dating was circumscribed by the novelty and status of having a girlfriend. He describes most relationships as ‘dating for the sake of dating’ and not because two people loved or felt attracted to each other. Illouz (2014) and O’Neill (2015) both discuss how sex is commodified in neoliberal, postfeminist times. In her discussion of the erotic novel Fifty Shades of Grey, Illouz (2014) discusses how sexuality for Christian Grey is a “prototype of what we may call serial recreational sexuality organized under the aegis of the market.” This is because sexuality “is now detached from its previous institutional referent of matrimony, but it is now organized in and by the consumer market...” (Illouz 2014: 41).
Aditya’s and Hari’s comments also point to how dating is also ‘recreational’, commodified and for its own sake.

Eck (2014) discusses how unmarried heterosexual men in their youth and twenties feel that they should have casual affairs and sex, but starting in their mid thirties must enter monogamous relationships and develop heterosexual maturity. Eck describes this as two-phase masculinity. Intimacy for adolescent boys is differently experienced, with some narrating stories of intense love and maturity and others narrating stories of two-phase masculinity. The latter are mostly men like Hari and Aditya from affluent families who have transnational exposure to media and travel and who can afford to invest in casual relationships and eventually move on to monogamous relationships.

In this section I have noted how adolescent boys often invest in what they consider to be serious relationships, experience love and deep emotions, form intimacies with girlfriends and experience pain during breakups. While there are some narratives which are about not-so-serious relationships, these too talk about some form of exclusivity and romance. While these might not entirely upset the normative narrative about male desire as conquest and male love as predatory, it does point to us to the gaps within scholarship. Social class is also an important marker of how young men experience romance. Elite and affluent young male participants have noted how their relationships during adolescence was not serious, while middle class men were more invested in their relationships.

**Adolescent Boys’ Ideas of Heterosexual Dating and Romance**

There are many ideas of what dating and romance involves. Apart from consumption and ‘public intimacy’, it also involves a complex network of rules. Many young men also recount how they don’t understand the concept of dating and boyfriend-girlfriend. To some these concepts seem alien and ‘Western’, while others seek to reformulate these to suit their own experiences of romance. Nineteen year old Atul who has a girlfriend falls in the latter category.

> I don’t understand the dating concept. If you like someone, that’s all. What I don’t like and don’t understand is hopping from one person to another. You can have a maximum of two or three partners, how do you do more than that? I also don’t get the whole girlfriend thing.

Nitin who grew up in the 1990s, speaks of a discomfort with the concept of dating and girlfriend-boyfriend because it seems culturally alien to him.
We didn’t understand the concept of dating or going out, it was too difficult to imagine. We got these only from Archies (comic book) and Friends (American TV Series). Boys were not speaking about relationships, they were speaking about women; the concept of girlfriend, boyfriend was not there.

Similarly, twenty two year old Shantanu also spoke about how the boys were not talking relationships but about girls and sex. Shantanu also elaborates on the idea that they didn’t talk about relationships because it was awkward.

[In] school most discussions were around sex. Everyone had a crush on some girl, very few people were in a relationship. They didn't talk about their relationships; they used to feel awkward to talk about it.

Saras also discusses how his peer group were not talking about relationships but about women. He also elaborates on how the aim was to objectify women.

They were objectifying the women, not nice to them. When you talk amongst guys, you don't talk about love relationships etc, never, never. Not even now. The talk was only about girls.

Saras seems to be the only one to discuss that sex talk amongst adolescent boys objectifies women. With limited interaction with girls and women in an all boys’ school, Nitin, Saras and Shanstanu were not able to conceptualise relationships. Gender segregation was structured in such a way that women- and consequently their bodies- were more important than a relationship with them. Rachel O’Neill (2015), in her work on the London seduction community, discusses how pick up artists don’t talk about relationships, but about getting women and eventually having sex with them. In their lectures, O’Neill notes, “women are not only objectified but made into object lessons” (8). O’Neill further notes “that ‘it is often not women per se that men desire, but women’s bodies’ (Burkett and Hamilton 2012: 827)” (10). I discuss O’Neill’s engagement with the London seduction community in detail later to understand adult men and adolescent boys’ relationship with women and intimacy.

Ayan, who is eighteen years old and went to an alternative co educational school, discusses the unsaid ‘rules’ that was there amongst his peers on how to treat girls and how they were supposed to behave with their girlfriends.

Ketaki: how were you supposed to treat girls, what were the codes and rules?

Ayan: she is priority. If I have made a plan before my friends call me and ask for a plan, I will want to go out with my friends. I know that I have to go with her because we have made that plan before… even if I have free time, I used to be with her. We used to go and play. We used to chill.

Ketaki: what were the other ways in which you were supposed to be as a boyfriend? Ayan: everyone who had a girlfriend used to treat their girlfriend as a priority. Whenever we used to go out to eat, we used to ask our girlfriends first ‘what do you want to have?’ And ‘do you want to sit here or go somewhere else?’ We used to ask her opinion first...
Ketaki: any other kind of rule that you had apart from this, as a boyfriend?

Ayan: we had a rule that everyone leaves their girlfriends home. If we had a car we used to go there. We used to take a tour of Mumbai and drop, even if it is a friend.

All the girls in our class, we were like, we were really close. Every boy used to leave every girl, even if it’s his friend. So for the girlfriend it is obvious.

Ayan’s narrative marks the ‘chivalrous’ rules that adolescent boys have towards girls and is different from the other narratives. This is not to say that a ‘chivalrous’ mode is inherently more equal, but that it forms a shift within the dominant understanding of male desire.

Chivalry is often understood as the benevolent paternalistic form of patriarchy. A recent article in The Atlantic (Khazan, 2015) discusses Michael Kimmel’s quest to turn college boys into ‘gentlemen’ and to lay down consensual codes of relating and sex on campuses. Kimmel’s use of the word gentleman in a campus meeting, the articles notes, was met with critique. A woman student noted that the use of the word gentleman (and hence chivalry) implies a woman who is ‘supposed to perform weakness so he [the gentleman] can feel good about himself for holding that door for me’. Kimmel responded to this critique by saying “I don’t agree with you... I think we can hold the door for people out of courtesy without it coming with a sense of entitlement to your body.” This discussion lays open the ambiguity with which ‘chivalry’ is understood today and how we might also interpret Ayan’s ‘rules’ of dating.

Sex in Relationships: Addressing the Media ‘Fantasy’ of the Sexually Overactive Urban Middle Class Adolescent

A number of articles in popular media over the last five to six years have carried titillating and sensational stories about urban middle class/upper middle class and also affluent

---


7 http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/secret-life-of-indian-teens/1/130880.html

adolescents’ sexual lives. These articles present a heady mix of moralising, moral panic and knee jerk reaction to the ways in which adolescents navigate the world of sexuality, technology and peer groups. Most of these articles are concerned about the increasing sex that adolescents are having at a younger age, which is often risky and unprotected. But this does seem to tell the whole story, since the articles forget to mention age- is it thirteen or fourteen or fifteen- and also do not define ‘having sex’ in greater detail. Being sexually active could mean a number of things and need not imply sexual intercourse. These articles often confuse any form of sexual activity- kissing, fondling, necking- to stand in for sexual intercourse. This moral panic and fear is increased when it is mixed with a heady cocktail of ‘peer pressure’, use of technology- facebook, chatrooms- and drugs, alcohol, partying and sexual abuse. These separate issues get combined to construct an adolescent subject who is weak, depraved and needs to be controlled through counselling and parental advice. The stories are specific to the metro cities- Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai- and represent the urban middle classes. Lower class adolescent sexuality is represented in a different way through the population council studies: as violent and coercive. The fear of unwanted pregnancies, STDs, STIs and HIV/AIDS is often central to both the classes, though the middle class narrative is largely centred on the depravities of a ‘debauched lifestyle’. Through the narratives of my participants I would like to challenge this dominant media narrative and briefly dwell on the ‘fantasy’ of the sexually overactive urban middle class adolescent.

Most of the male participants I interviewed spoke about the age at which they and their friends had penetrative sexual intercourse. Most of them mentioned how none of them were having intercourse in school, but rather in junior college or more commonly in undergraduate college. From these interviews, I can safely say that the age for their first sexual intercourse was around seventeen to eighteen years of age, though there were few people who were sexually active earlier too. Shantanu discusses how sex was something that didn’t happen in school, and that people were only kissing their partners in school.

Shantanu: In school it was assumed that they won't do anything physically. They are too young to do that. They are 14, 15 yrs old. In college it was assumed eventually they will go on to do something.

Ketaki: what would people do?

Shantanu: I guess kissing would be more than... back then...

Prakash also discusses how people were not having sex in school.

Ketaki: Were people having sex before 10th?

Prakash: No.
Ketaki: By the 12th?

Prakash: not in our college. I know of other colleges. I know of cases where they went for trips and entered [in] a sexual relationship. [They were] going ahead than making out. Making out was common, in our school was common. Going the extra step, no one was doing it… very few (had sex). In our school no one [did]… lot of it was theoretical. People were making out, not [having] sexual relations.

Aditya, who is from an affluent family in South Mumbai and went to an elite school, discusses how very few people had sexual intercourse in school. He mentions that most didn’t go beyond ‘second base’ which includes kissing, touching of breasts and other parts of the body. The four bases metaphor, borrowed from baseball, is used by American adolescets to denote degrees of intimacy in a sexual relationship. The home base/fourth base refers to penetrative sexual intercourse and sometimes the third base includes oral sex.

Ketaki: did people get beyond the 2nd base?

Aditya: I am sure, ya yaa ya, for sure. Not a large majority. Not even a fair number. But a few definitely got there.

Eighteen year old Ayan also discusses how people were not having sexual intercourse before the 10th standard, and that people started having sex in junior college or in college.

I had a girlfriend in the ninth standard and that time kissing was the biggest thing we had. I think that time that was the limit. After tenth, most people reached second base. Ninth and tenth standard it was second base. No one crossed second base.

Ya, I think we used to talk about both [sex and romance], but at some points, when in school we used to talk about romance: [we asked each other] did you want to have sex with her? We were like, no man, I have not thought about it, its damn…. I am guessing that they didn't want to do it, or they were scared. Stuff like that. They were scared of doing it.

When I was in a relationship in ninth standard, I thought, I should have sex with her. I thought about it, even I was scared, what happens if she gets pregnant or stuff like that. I don't know what to do. So I didn't.

Ketaki: Was it the similar thing for your friends too?

Ayan: I am guessing yes. When he used to say, share details, like should I have sex with her, and we were like, it’s up to you, what if she gets pregnant. Life will get screwed, and stuff like that. Till ninth standard it was that. End of ninth standard people got mature, everyone was mature. We were very childish in other ways…

Ayan’s thoughtful narrative also talks about the discussions that adolescent boys were having around sex, that it was something that was not automatic or a sense of entitlement, but that it also scared the boys. If sex is attached with fear and shame for girls, it is attached with fear, especially of pregnancy, for the boys. These brief narratives have upset the ideas of the sexually overactive and rash adolescent. As the narratives confirm, adolescent boys are also thoughtful, fearful and do not always ‘recklessly’ have sex.
Sex and Romance: Thinking Through the Divide

Many of my participants spoke about the separation between love and lust, romance and sex. For some this was a source of confusion, for others it was understood that sex and romance were separate things not to be brought together. In the following quote, Varun talks complexly about not knowing what desire is:

The idea of romantic love for me was entirely supplied by cinema, to a lesser extent our novels. Romantic love was just as it happens in movies. It always started with boy liked the girl. The boy either did something- or something just happened- or fate struck- that the girl started liking the boy and they got together in the end. My whole idea of romantic love vis a vis sex was really skewed man, because of these movies. At that point I placed them in a hierarchy. Romantic love is one, and sex is lower, and sex maybe something entirely removed from love- as if they were different things. There was this phrase thrown around at that time, like those who can’t distinguish love from sex, love from lust. [This] further polarized them in my head, that love and lust are different things, love and sex are different things.

I didn’t know desire, just plain desire, I didn’t know what to do with that. Like you just feel something- you don’t know what to do with that- you just want to do something. You don’t stop to identify whether this is love, or sex or lust. This is desire. I could talk to guys about this, and I could not talk to girls about this. And I wondered a lot, do girls feel this, do they not feel this? Does that make them more evolved, does that make them more sensible more intelligent, does that make them something else?

Coming from where I did, there was hardly any dialogue between two sexes about sex or desire, to the point where expression of desire by males was allowed only in a certain way and tightly regulated. For women, of course, the verbal elision was so complete that I had serious doubts whether they felt any desire at all. This led to a deep schism in the idea of women in my head between them as being desirable and as expressing desire. It seemed only natural that someone who is desirable be equally capable of feeling and expressing desire. But the elision of expression was almost taken by me to be an elision (or a lack) of desire. It took me quite some time to get over this. It is only now that I can identify this as that which causes women to be identified as sex objects alone, and not as sex subjects.

Varun’s narrative touches upon a number of concepts. In his experience, the absence of female desire does not only affect women’s experience of their own sexuality, but it also structures men’s understandings of desire and gender relations. Varun elaborates on the divide between love and sex, love and lust. I return to Hunterrrr here since it popularly explores ideas of lust and male sexuality. The protagonist Mandar mentions how one should not confuse between love and sex, because sex is a physical need, which he has been engaging in since his adolescence. The separation between love and lust is a common trope in popular culture and cinema. Katherine Twamley (2013) explores how Gujarati Indians understand love as separate from sex. She elaborates on how the “participants delineated two kinds of ‘love’ when discussing relationships – physical love and ‘true’ love – emphasising their preference for the latter less physical type… true love was similar to love for family members, an idealised ‘pure’ love, untainted by physical attraction. In contrast, physical love was denounced as a lower kind of short-term love, akin to passion or attraction” (Twamley 2013: 331). Twamley’s participants discussed how “sexual restraint in a relationship signifies
serious intentions for the relationship (such as marriage), while physical love denotes a short-term diversion, similar to a ‘fling’” (Twamley 2013: 331). Women in her study explain a man’s seriousness in a relationship by his apparent disinterest in sex.

Other scholars have also dealt with the distinction between love and sex. Parveez Mody (2008), in her extensive ethnography of love-marriages in Delhi, discusses the notions of love within the city. She notes how “‘public conceptions’ of love are predominantly negative. ‘Love’ is described in Hindi in two ways: adhyatmik pyar, or spiritual love, and sharirik pyar, or bodily love. In Urdu, the word mohabbat is roughly equivalent to the Hindi pyaar, but there is another category of love which is ishq. Ishq combines a sense of both spiritual and bodily love, as it is used in Sufi devotional worship... In Delhi, women are described as being eminently capable of spiritual love, whereas men are constantly suspected of being susceptible to its less noble counterpart: bodily love. Further, adhyatmik pyar is viewed as a thing of the past, with young people today being obsessed with sharirik pyar, chumma-chatti (‘kissing and licking’) and ‘holding hands’. The interesting thing about the distinctions drawn between spiritual love and bodily love is that they map onto dichotomies such as the morally righteous past and the degenerate and corrupt present” (106-107). Mody goes on to describe how those who enter into ‘love-marriages’ describe their love as ‘spiritual love’ to gain legitimacy.

Ritty Lukose (2009), who writes in the context of Kerala, frames the notions of romantic love in Kerala through a discussion of the 19th century novel Indulekha by O. Chandu Menon. Lukose writes that in the novel, “romantic love becomes about the management of its Other, sexuality.” Drawing from J Devika’s work, Lukose points out how “in late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century discourse, premam [love] was persistently counter-posed to kamam, or lust, as a purer and more refined kind of love that provided a more solid grounding for monogamous unions. O. Chandu Menon creates Indulekha as heroine through the positive valuation of premam over kamam, love over lust” (Lukose 2009: 103).

In a paper which explores the gender differences and cultural construction of youth sexuality among lower class college youth in Mumbai, Abraham (2004) discusses how adolescent male sexuality is not tied to marriage, unlike that of girls. She notes that “for boys, sex and marriage were not synonymous and therefore premarital and extramarital sex were viewed as being different from sex within the confines of marriage” (Abraham 2004: 239). Unlike girls, the boys had ‘premarital’ sex with their peers, sex workers as well as older women and engaged in ‘time pass’ as well as ‘true love’ relationships. Here she defines ‘time pass’ as “a transitory relationship with a partner of their age, characterised by sexual intimacy leading to
sexual intercourse” (217) and ‘true love’ as a relationship with “a partner of similar age, and [which] was pursued with the implicit or explicit intention of marriage”. This understanding betrays what we see to be the divide between sex and romantic love.

This separation of love and sex is complexly dealt with in the young men’s narratives. In Krishna’s narrative, the separation between love and lust betrays a deep misogyny, where one’s girlfriend is to be protected, but other women are sexually available. Krishna discusses how his friend Saurabh often spoke about other women in sexual terms but considered his own girlfriends to be his property and thus not allowing anyone to talk about her in sexual terms. This narrative points to how women become the site of men’s and community honour and leaves them open to sexual violence.

Ketaki: Were boys talking about a girl sexually and romantically? Was there a difference?

Krishna- Saurabh liked Smita, he was protective about her. When he used to speak about other girls… our ears [would] bleed. It was more or less like… just to prove oneself, mardangi dikhane ke lye (to prove one's masculinity)...We were listeners, he [Saurabh] was like ‘it is like this, I have seen, she lives next to us, most of the girls used to come from a particular society…he used to draw dirty pictures in toilet, about this girl and that girl, about Shivpriya. About Smita he was very protective. ‘Don’t tell anything about her’. No one could talk about Smita, but he could talk about other girls. He was very outspoken, that is why I came to know.

Like Twamley’s respondents, Kevin talks about the differences between romance and sex and how romance with a girl does not include sex, at least not in the beginning.

Ketaki: When you were sexually attracted was there any degree of romance and love?

Kevin: No.

Ketaki: and when there was romance, was there any sexual...

Kevin: I think it is ingrained, you scare them off if you go and... For the crushes, my experience at least… that thing of not scaring them off… that [sex] was not the first thing that was on the mind. The first thing was getting them to reciprocate the feelings, then whatever came after that. I will get her to like me. That is it.

Kevin discusses the progression from a crush to ‘dating’ a girl, when ‘real feelings’ get involved. Kissing and necking is all that they could imagine in school and no more. He also discusses the relationship between ‘feelings’ and being sexual, and how crushes were more about getting the girl to like you more than anything else. This does not mean that there is nothing sexual about the relationship but that this is restricted to kissing and does not ‘progress’ into sexual intercourse.

Kevin: When they had a crush it was not sexual. When the real feelings got involved then all that went away.

Ketaki: What were the conversation around crushes with your peers?

Kevin: I wished she liked me back, how do I get her to like me.
Ketaki: When you got a girl to like you, what would you like the girl to do?

Kevin: When we got [the girl to like us] MSM was a thing, messenger, chatting, meeting up. We could only imagine [that], kissing necking all that would come...

Ayan discusses what it was like to have sex for the first time, the transition from serious to casual relationships. He talks about the transition as being fraught and how having or not having sex affects the seriousness of the relationship.

Ayan: People adapted, [they reached] home base later. First or second time it was scary. Later everyone was fine. Even I am meeting my friends. Even for them it has become a casual thing, having a fling. Girls and boys were having a fling or relationship... after you have sex with a girl; they think it is a serious relationship. Before that they think it is casual, he might be serious with her. He might be using her.

Ketaki: now they are not that serious.

Ayan: it depends on the guy... if he has sex with her, he is serious. Otherwise he will just, he will just [be] casual[ly] dating. He will leave her after one or two months, if he has sex he will leave her after six to eight months, little longer. But it’s different, I know some people who have sex, and it is casual.

Yes, [being sexually active] is common right now in the 11th and 12th standard.

Some people are having serious relationships [now], some less serious. Before it was not like that. Before the 10th standard, it was all serious. Before 10th I had my first fling, fourth base first time, and she was not from here. The next day I thought what should I do? Later when we met again, she was very casual about it. It happened the first time. It was pretty weird. It was a good thing that I didn't have to get serious or get awkward about it, and she was not awkward about it. She wanted to just be friends; I didn't know how to deal with it. Should I text her, talk to her...

Ayan goes on to discuss how there is less awkwardness in a relationship and more awkwardness in a fling. The fling is awkward because they don’t know each other well. The relationship is simpler because there is an available script- of texting and meeting each other. They are friends with each other before they have a relationship. This is not the case with flings which is awkward because there is no script, they do not know the other person well and they have not been friends before the fling. Flings were also not common until after the tenth standard; before that romance was a serious non-casual affair. Kevin also discusses the difference between a fling and a relationship. Flings, according to him and his friends are short term, lasting no more than three months. Kevin characterises flings in the following manner: “fling was when a girl liked you, you were not interested, but she was giving you something so...” Aditya also discusses the ambiguities of different kinds of relationships. His idea of flings and hook-ups are taken from the West and he considers the Western definitions to be the ‘correct’ ones, whereas locally produced ideas of flings seem to him unacceptable and wrong. He also admits that the terminology for different types of relationships is ambiguous and that there is no consensus. These later narratives deal more complexly with
sex and romance, since flings and casual relationships blur the boundaries between love and sex.

Most scholarship has understood love and lust within the 19th Century framework of sharirik and adhyatmik love. In Mody’s narrative of love marriages in Delhi, she notes how love and lust map onto the ‘dichotomies [of the] morally righteous past and the degenerate and corrupt present’. Drawing from the earlier section on narratives from the media, one can see how the sexual lives of adolescents lend themselves to a ‘corrupt present’. The difference between romance and sex for middle and upper middle class boys in Mumbai is framed by post-globalisation, consumerism, and cinema which are very different from the 19th century frameworks. While this does not mean that there is no division, the interplay between romance and sex is different today and older frameworks prove inadequate to understand them. Romance is tied to consumerism and popular culture, while notions of respectability, reputation still linger at the edges. The narratives of young men here have uncovered how sex and romance, while being articulated as separate, are also intertwined in narratives of flings and casual sex. These narratives of the awkwardness of flings, the separation of sex and romance with one’s girlfriend, and Ayan’s experience of thoughtfulness in the face of his first sexual intercourse, all points to a less than ‘corrupt present’. Following from this, in the next section I shall see how the less-than-corrupt-present is marked by failures, awkwardness and rejections and how that makes for a romance of indeterminacy.

**Romance of Indeterminacy: Narratives of Heterosexual Crushes, Failure and Uncertainty**

While boys’ romantic lives are under-theorised, the dominant narrative of romance for young men is one of conquest, where failure inevitably leads to violence. Men’s failures at romance and rejections from women have often resulted in coercion, rape, abuse, acid attacks, and murder. Much has been written on men’s inability to hear no from a spurned lover (Arunima 2013, Nair 2013). But other narratives of failures, or what in South India is popularly known

---

8 As I have noted elsewhere (Chowkhani 2015), casual sexual relationships are not entirely devoid of caring, emotions and romance. Paromita Vohra (2016) also describes flings and casual sex as articulated in a language of consumption and ‘scoring’: “many indicators of emancipation are articulated in a sort of scoring language. Threesome, tick. Sex in an elevator or cab or both, tick. A same-sex encounter, tick. Your score: sexually free. These concepts certainly indicate a certain sexual openness and diversity. But they also formulate sex in terms of consumption, rather than individual exploration, and so, create new norms that people feel they must conform to” (66).
as ‘love failure’, is hardly discussed, if not rarely theorised. In this section I would like to read the narratives of ‘love failures’ and crushes as a challenge to the dominant discourse of male romance as conquest. These crushes and failures in heterosexual romance don’t lead to violence, questioning boys’ inabilities to hear a ‘no’ and accept rejection.

A common pattern that emerged in speaking to young men, especially those from all boys’ schools, was the narrative of uncertainty in romance. Many of them recounted the ways in which they found it difficult to approach a girl or the ways in which they were clueless about what to do if they liked a girl. Varun’s narrative is emblematic of the ways in which many boys find it difficult to shift from an all boys’ school to a co-educational space where they are able to have interactions with women. One of the ways in which this manifests is not just uncertainty but also a general feeling of the unknown.

I had a crush on this female- I again didn’t know what to do. I went about it in a very ham handed way. I did the only thing I knew: I went and bought her a rose. She accepted it and she told me very sweetly that she is Parsi which means that it effectively bans her from dating anyone other than a Parsi. I was kind of glad for that because that crush was representative of a whole culture shock. So once I got over that, it became a lot more sorted.

Farhad also mentions the uncertainty and diffidence in initiating a relationship with a girl he liked: “I liked this girl. [I] didn’t know what to do, what to say.” While talking of his first relationship at the age of eighteen, Jerry elaborates on the uncertainty and the limited romantic scripts that were available to him. In this case, romance is centred on consumer practices since no other ways of conceptualising romancing seem available to adolescent boys.

That was the first relationship I was in, I didn’t know what the fuck to do! What am I supposed to do? I liked this girl, I told her, now what? So you do the traditional things, go for a movie, go out for lunch, [it] would have meant saving up. It was the odd movie. I would pay for her ticket too. She would say ‘don’t get any stuff’, she was completely against it.

Jerry goes on to discuss how there is no script to think of romance, especially adolescent romance, in popular culture or elsewhere.

There is no direct source which tells you- at least the media and others- how you should think and feel about it [romance]. In terms of… in movies… it is much older people- [not] your age- are you supposed to be feeling this way? There are no guidelines. And if nobody feels that way then what?

Jerry’s comment is telling because it discusses not only the lack of pedagogic sources on adolescent romance, it also explicitly mentions how popular culture is saturated with adult

---

9 Sriram Mohan (2014), discusses how “ideas of ‘love failure’ have been articulated by Tamil film songs over the years” and argues that the “Tamil film song serves as a site for the ‘production’ of romantic love and traces the geneology of the ‘failed’ male lover in Tamil cinema through these songs” (7).
narratives of romance. Very few films which form part of the repertoire of Bombay cinema from the 1990s onwards have dealt centrally with adolescent romance. *Rockford* (1999), *Ek Choti si Love Story* (2002), *Mera Pehla Pehla Pyaar* (2007), *Tere Sang* (2009), *Bubblegum* (2011) *Sixteen* (2013) are some of the films that deal with adolescent romance. Except for *Rockford* and *Bubblegum* which naturalise adolescent romance and represent it in a nuanced manner, the other films give a dominant narrative of adolescent romance as irrational, hormonal, risky and dangerous. While college romances have formed part of cinematic narratives, adolescence has slipped off the radar of the popular cinematic imagination. A few popular Marathi films though have dealt centrally with adolescent romance in the last few years, such *Balak Palak* (2012) which discusses sexuality education and sexual knowledge, *Timepass* (2014) which talks of true love and timepass love, as well as inter-caste love and *Fandry* (2014) which dwells on the painful unrequited love of a lower caste boy for an upper caste girl in a village in Maharashtra.

While films like *Rockford* and *Ek Chotisi Love Story* discuss young love and crushes, the young men I interview also recount the crushes they had on girls in school. Varun recounts a crush he had on a girl in his building when he was in school: “I had a crush on a girl in my building. This was in ninth and tenth standard. But nothing much happened. I later found out in college that she was actually going out with a friend of mine.” What is most telling in this short account is how the crush is normalised and inaction rendered ordinary: “nothing much happened”. In the following narratives I will follow the theme of ‘nothing much happened’ and the awkwardness of young love and crushes. Krishna discusses the feelings of a crush and talks about wanting to just see and meet her: “I wonder how to explain, I would like to meet her, I would like to see her… I was going to school more…trying to sit next to her. It is an organic process. Mak[ing] excuses to talk to her. My friends knew, they used to tease me for a while. I had a crush for two to three years. If I like someone it is like that, there is no specific reason why I like”. Kevin discusses how his first crush was Emma Watson and not a girl in his school. Similarly, Jerry’s talks about his first crush who was a female TV star.

The first girl that I actually liked was a television character. It didn’t work out very well, she had superpowers come on! There was this [American] TV show [1994-1998]: The Secret World of Alex Mack. The lead character was played by Larisa Oleynik. She was this girl who gets superpowers and she was like this tomboyish girl. I guess I identified with her because she had an elder sister who is a genius. And she is not that great in studies. She would wear a hat backwards and wear dungarees and stuff like that. To this day I find that really woooo [expression of excitement]…

Jerry’s crush and enduring attraction to tomboys is not a common narrative of heterosexual attraction. Most young men’s masculinity is predicated on being attracted to feminine ‘girly’ girls, women nearing the physical characteristics of a porn star- large breasts, long hair and so
on. Jerry’s continued attraction to a woman who wears dungarees, wears her hat backwards and is tomboyish, not only subverts a normative male desire for feminine women, it also constructs his masculinity in a non-hegemonic way. In this narrative, Jerry’s desire for Alex Mack also arises out of identification with her.

Shantanu talks about the crushes he had in the fifth standard and the failures that he met with when he asked a girl out in the ninth standard. He discusses the sadness that he felt for a short while after the girl rejected him. He also discusses the feelings of having a crush and that people were scared to have sexual relationships in school. One can notice how Shantanu’s discussion of crushes involves feelings of sadness, fear, obsession and attachment. While these feelings may not be present all the same time, they do occur at different points of time during Shantanu’s narrative of crushes and ‘love failures’. The obsession also does not turn into stalking or violence, but as seen earlier, ‘nothing much happens’ after the rejection.

Ketaki: When did you first start liking someone?

Shantanu: In fifth Standard, I liked two girls. [In] eight-ninth standard, one particular girl. [You] start thinking about that person more and more, become obsessed. [In] eight-ninth standard my friends told me to ask her out. I did ask her out, but she told me like she is too young to date... I felt a bit sad… then it was ok.

Ketaki: What was the feeling of a crush?

Shantanu: If you heard a romantic song when you think about her. Spend more time with her, talk to her.

Ketaki: was there the notion that a crush would develop into a date and would lead to something sexual?

Shantanu: No. everyone agreed on that. People are scared to do such things in school I guess.

Prakash discusses how they would tease people who had crushes. “Especially when they had crushes we would make it a point that if someone likes someone [we would] tease them. Not when they were dating, not as much.” Saras also discusses the awkwardness of crushes, how they were a private affair for him and how the imagination of a crush was borrowed from movies.

Saras: Crushes were more common. People used to keep to themselves. People used to be awkward. They would walk differently. They would tie a handkerchief around their neck. Less than five percent got a girl. Less than ten percent tried (to get a girl), most didn't try. I didn't try. I was shy. I don't know why I didn't try.

Ketaki: Why didn't your friends try?

Saras: some were extroverts, so they tried out. We were teasing two people, and they started dating. I never shared about my crushes with friends. They were talking about their crushes, what they wanted to do...when they liked a girl. They would talk about her. I would never discuss my crushes with anyone. No one knew, it was private.
Ketaki: What was the idea of a crush?

Saras: from movies basically, kissing basically… [that] was Emraan Hashmi’s time. Actors would kiss so that would be famous. [The film] Murder was the first one. Kissing scenes [were] most famous…

Saras also talks about the regret of keeping his crushes to himself and not proposing to the girls he liked. He regrets not having a relationship during his adolescent years, bemoans the failures of the crushes he had and the fact that he had to keep it all a secret. These feelings of regret form part of Saras’ growing up years. Giodarno, Manning and Longmore (2006) discuss how awkwardness is an organic part of the experience of romance for adolescents. They note that “boys report significantly higher levels of communication awkwardness in connection to their relationship with a current/most recent partner…these communication difficulties are especially likely to surface in boys’ references to the early days of their dating careers or in discussions of how a given relationship had changed over time” (Giodarno et al 2006: 272). Prakash also talks about the awkwardness, weirdness and failure of having a crush.

Ketaki: when did you first start liking someone?

Prakash: End of sixth standard I had a crush on this girl. I just thought I liked her. I didn't know what that feeling was at that time…At that time I didn't even know. I just liked her and it’s just a weird feeling, we used to talk. It was a weird feeling. It was a different feeling, it was not normal. I didn't know in the sense, in the sixth grade I didn't think of it as … I was eleven years old.

In Nitin’s narrative we sense despondency and the difficult ways in which crushes have to negotiate with the demands of academics and a career.

The crashes were more common in school, on a teacher or some girl you had seen somewhere. Later, the pressure was too much to perform, and there was no way you could think of anything else.

Crushes on teachers are commonly represented in popular culture. In Rockford, Rajesh Naidu, the protagonist falls in love with the pretty female teacher Miss Vegas, writes a love letter to her, fantasises about her in a filmy dream sequence and also masturbates after catching a glimpse of her breasts. He is not the only one who is attracted to her. Everyday, all the boys in the school line up to watch and greet Miss Vegas as she enters the school and walks to her classroom. But in the following narrative, Pratik mentions that he found the teachers too intimidating to have crushes on.

There were crushes, definitely there were crushes. I remember from the fifth standard onwards, it was about very ambiguously trying to find out what is the best way to get the attention of your crush. I didn’t have crushes on teachers; some of them were quite intimidating. With girls [crushes] was there. In the fifth standard, I remember having this crush on this one particular girl. From the eighth standard onwards you are attracted to a few people based on the aspects that you find attractive. There was this one particular girl that I
thought I could connect with, you know someone whom I could sit and speak to, someone I could have a conversation with. There was also another girl that I found physically attractive and there was also definitely an element of, sort of an intellectual engagement. For me it was always [whether] I [could] keep a girl’s attention by speaking to her and not performing. I played football in school, I never really took to those very aggressive kinds of masculinities, and I used to also practice karate with a friend of mine. So in a way that was about me trying to assert a kind of masculinity to contrast that of peers and I think that was something that gave me particular weightage with them as well.

Pratik consciously tries to fashion a non-hegemonic masculinity, one not predicated on brute force or physical strength but on the ability to engage intellectually with a girl. Pratik’s performance of this kind of masculinity, though non-hegemonic, does not make him subordinate, since he doesn’t recount any instances of teasing, abuse or harassment by other boys. Nor does he recount any experiences of insecurities in not performing a hegemonic masculinity. Vinay, who is twenty, is also keen to talk of his crushes. His narrative also seeks to undo the ideas of ‘puppy love’ and dwells complexly on the question of adult memory.

Ketaki: Would you like to talk about your crushes?

Vinay: Ya (promptly). I had a crush on this girl at school and could totally show you photos on my phone [Vinay’s phone was not working so he couldn’t show me her photos]. I’m totally cool with it. I didn’t tell her I liked her. This was in the ninth or tenth standard. She used to look very pretty. I used to [be] friends with her.

The first time when I liked [someone], for that time I was very serious. I was quite thrilled about it. I might be making up. I’m saying supposedly things; they weren’t really real, childish stuff. I didn’t have any weird feeling that I should kiss her or something, but just that I used to like her company, as simple as that. I never told her. She did get to know though, after school. I used to like her company; that was the major component. At that time she was very important to me.

Krishna talks about when he first started liking someone and how he was too shy to speak to her. His narrative also discusses the uncertainty of love, shyness, and failure at initiating a romantic relationship.

Ketaki: when did you first start liking someone?

Krishna: probably, first in the sixth or seventh standard. Not the boyfriend kind, I wanted to meet her. I am a conservative and shy guy. It was impossible for me to speak. I used to speak to her. In that atmosphere in school [it] was hard. If I like a girl now I can go and tell her I like you. But I have that self confidence now. I have that outer picture that what will happen if she will say no and that will be it. [At that time it was] like school and strict. That is why I never said, I didn’t have that daring then. She is a good friend, I don’t have that feeling now. In school it was strong, now I meet her in a group, now it is not like that.

Saras also talks about how he and his friends failed at relationships. While there is melancholia in his narrative, the story of his friend is marked by humour, parental interference and deep friendship amongst boys.

Ketaki: when did you first start liking someone?
Saras: [In the] seventh or eighth standard. [She was a] classmate. I don't know, just liked her. I was shy, (didn't do anything). [I liked her for] one year...I had multiple crushes...Sometimes [I would] talk to them, sometimes they would approach with doubts. I want to be with them, talk to them. [It was] definitely sexual. [I didn't have any] relationships before I turned eighteen... Most of [my friends had]... same story as me, talk, message, call. Nothing else. A friend failed at relationship twice. He used to call. They used to talk, and message. I used to read their texts. They were normal. No abuses, just talking normally. It was not evident he was hitting on her. He continued chatting for six to seven months and then he said he liked her. The girl told her mother, and the mother told his mother and his mother shouted at me and him. Because we were best friends, so I was supposed to tell her that... his mother shouted, 'you should have told me, this is not the age, now it's the tenth standard, have to study.' I was very angry at him... Again he started chatting with another person. I was angry at him. ‘Don’t do anything, I will tell your mother’ [I told him]. That's it, I was inquisitive, so I asked. The second one didn't tell her mother. This was in the ninth-or tenth standard.

Kevin discusses the lack of a script on dating:

Ketaki: What did your friends tell you when they dated girls?

Kevin: they didn't describe anything, it was secret. It was more frustrating because we used to say, ‘say what to do’.

Ketaki: how do you know what to do?

Kevin: they were also figuring it out themselves. [There was] no script to say what to do.

Hari on the other hand talks about the awkwardness of a relationship and the subsequent rejection. But unlike many of his peers, he is not very serious about the relationship. Hari is also an eighteen year old affluent young man from South Mumbai and has been to an elite international school as well as studied outside India. While he does not portray himself as the ‘cool dude’, but he mentions that he is not interested in studies, that he is the clown of the class. During the interview he often states that he does not remember most things and seems extremely distracted and inattentive.

Ketaki: What was awkward?

Hari: I remember when I was in the seventh grade, I went out for a date. It was very awkward, we didn't have anything to talk about. I didn't know what to do. I remember she called me on the phone to tell it is not going to work out, I didn't know. I just laughed and I cut the phone and... I laughed and I started watching television. I forgot about it really fast. [It] didn't bother me.

Failure emerges as a common trope in many of the adolescent boys’ narratives of crushes, uncertain romance and relationships. This leads us to ask: how can we conceptualise failure in romance and relationships? How do we think about failure as an integral part of romance, in such a way that it does not produce a violent reaction? Judith Halberstam (2011) discusses failure as a productive category since it helps to destabilise the capitalist ideas of success and profit. Quoting Heather Love, Halberstam writes “same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility and loss... if, in a Lacanian sense, all desire is
impossible, impossible because unsustainable, then the queer body and queer social worlds become the evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfilment, and success(ion).” (Halberstam 2011: 94).

I would like to argue that these boys’ narratives of heterosexual romance and desire, crushes and relationships, open to us ‘queer’ ways of thinking of heterosexuality. I contend that failure and the impossibilities of desire exist even within heterosexual romance especially if it is an exogamous relationship, but even within an endogamous one. These narratives help to destabilise the ‘success narratives’ of heteronormativity. While I agree that historically heterosexuality is “rooted in the logic of achievement, fulfilment and success”, ideas of crushes, ‘love failures’, infatuations and uncertainties are ways in which this dominant logic can be subverted. These failures also upset what queer theorists have referred to as ‘heterosexuality’s linear future’, or ‘straight time’ (Talburt 2009: 87), for it disrupts the teleological progression from desire to coupledom/marriage to reproduction.

While the discussion on consent is important, I claim that it is these ‘failures’ which must be increasingly talked about and normalised, so that hearing a ‘no’ for young men does not become contrary to a dominant logic of masculine desire. It might be useful to consider failure a part of heterosexual desire and extend that logic to pedagogical discussions of romance and masculinities. The idea that romance is not always successful or straightforward can then be built into discussions of romance within the classroom and allow for discussions of awkwardness, confusion, impossibility and loss.

Many of the young men discuss how they want sexuality education to teach them how to ask a girl out and how to date. I explore on the importance of failure to understanding adolescent male sexuality. O’Neill’s (2015) study on the London seduction community tells us a different story, where men are taught by pick up artists and trainers skills on how to seduce women- not for relationships, as much for casual sex. This is to avoid failure in relationships. O’Neill reads the seduction community as a form of mediated intimacy and “not so much [as] a deviation or departure from current social conventions as an extension and acceleration of existing cultural norms. That is to say, the underpinning logics of this community-industry are consonant with broader reconfigurations of intimacy and sexual subjectivity taking place within the contemporary British context” (10 Emphasis in original). The participants in my study also want advice on relationships, though not necessarily on how to have sexual access to women, but how to date them and ask them out. This does not mean that a sexual relationship is completely off the table in this scenario. In a case like this, it might be useful to rethink young men’s desires to be ‘schooled’ in the art of dating women, and to think more
carefully when we want to discuss ‘love and romance’ within the sexuality education curriculum. While we might want to discuss romance and dating within the curriculum, the conversation has to be mindful not to slip into the sort of ‘training’ that is offered at seduction communities.

**Analysing Romantic Masculinity and Failure**

This section elaborates on the idea of failure and what it means for romantic masculinities. I examine whether failure can be used to rethink masculinities and how it might be useful to reconfigure the affects of sexuality education. In such an analysis, failure becomes an important category to think through about gender and sexuality, especially masculinity and sexuality education.

Louisa Allen in her article “‘Sensitive and Macho all at the same time’: Young Heterosexual Men and Romance” (2007a) discusses romantic masculinity and examines whether that reconfigures gender relations and challenges the ‘dominance’ of the hegemonic male. Using interviews with adolescent boys in New Zealand, Allen writes how adolescent boys do exhibit notions of love, caring, affection with their girlfriends. But this does not necessarily “pose a significant disruption to the operation of hegemonic masculinity that would allow more opportunities for equitable heterosexual relationships”. She argues that young men often have to walk the tightrope of appearing romantic as well as macho at the same time. She writes that “young men’s willingness to acknowledge themselves as romantic and to talk about romantic experiences as pleasurable does not represent a significant disruption to the operation of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, it can be seen as an example of the way in which hegemonic masculinity has appropriated and reconfigured a previously subordinated romantic masculinity. This appropriation can be seen as a result of contemporary demands on heterosexual men to meet the romantic needs of their partners, to enjoy the pleasures of romantic experience, and to prove themselves, as one participant coined it, “sensitive and real macho all at the same time” (Allen 2007a: 148-149).

Similarly, Korobov (2009) analyses young men’s narratives of romantic and sexual experiences by looking at the use of irony in their stories. The narratives fall within the broad categories of promiscuity, seduction and vulnerability. Korobov notes how irony is used to “reconfigure power in more ordinary and nonchalant ways and hybridize the discursive performances that formulate such reconfigurations back into the hegemonic bloc. For the men in this study, irony is a strategy for rearticulating power at a more prosaic or quotidian level
of social practice” (Korobov 2009: 296). Discussing the stories of vulnerability, Korobov notes how “unlike promiscuity and seduction, being vulnerable breaks with canonical hegemonic ideals. But like the stories about promiscuity and seduction, stories about vulnerability were also strategically mitigated” (Korobov 2009: 294).

While I do find Allen’s and Korobov’s findings useful to think about the boys’ experience of romance through the lens of masculinity, I would also like to understand how certain affects such as failure within the experience of romance can re-configure the modes in which we understand adolescent masculinity in the first place. I agree with Allen that romantic masculinities need not be counter-hegemonic and that they do often play out unequal power relations. The ‘failure’ of boys at romance and their feelings of awkwardness and loss do not in any way represent more equal gender relations. Rather, they represent a different understanding of romantic masculinity which does not follow the capitalist logic of success and certainty. While many of the narratives that I have analysed do fall within the larger category of ‘romantic masculinity’, they do not necessarily neatly fit into it. Rather, the kind of masculinity that emerges from romance is predominantly one of ‘awkwardness, failure, loss’ which presents a different kind of masculinity. This does not mean that this might move us towards more equal gender relations. Rather, this points to the vulnerabilities of adolescent masculinity, as seen through romance, which following Kimmel is entitled, but at the same time not necessarily hegemonic. These present to us a fractured, fragile and unstable masculinity which is struggling to make sense of desire.

Unlike Allen and Korobov, Giodarno, Manning and Longmore (2006) discuss awkwardness and failure in boys’ romantic relationships. Their study starts with the admission that boys’ romantic relationships have been understudied. Their research “suggests[s] a portrait of adolescent boys as relatively less confident and yet more emotionally engaged in romantic relationships than previous characterizations would lead us to expect. The findings regarding power and influence are also unexpected from a straightforward gender inequality point of view... As boys make the transition from peers to romance, they lack experience with intimate ways of relating... even as they are beginning to develop a high interest and at times strong emotional attachment to certain romantic partners … The argument that boys move in a straight line toward autonomy, or the declaration that "heterosexuality is masculinity” (Holland et al. 1996) are global assertions that do not take into account the adjustments that boys as well as girls continually make as they begin to forget his new type of intimate social relationship” (Giodarno et al, 2006: 282). A study by Giodarno et al (2006) resonates with the narratives that I have elicited in this chapter since they both challenge what the authors call
“the straight line towards autonomy”. I want to further discuss what this understanding of masculinity might mean for sexuality education and how it points to its limits.

The affective registers that characterise adolescent male romance are often negative affects of confusion, awkwardness, failure, loss, impossibility, shyness, vulnerability, sadness, uncertainty, instability and regret. Elizabeth Stephens (2015), tracing a feminist genealogy of bad feelings comments on how “affect is understood as something that is constitutive, not expressive, of subjectivity” (Stephens 2015: 281). Similarly, I argue that the ‘negative affects’ described above are constitutive of the romantic subjectivity of adolescent boys. This puts into question the linear ways in which we think of the project of sexuality education. I borrow from Nancy Lesko (2010) in theorising these ‘negative/bad feelings’ and how they put into question the ‘sure and stable’ feelings of sexuality education curriculum. Lesko notes how the abstinence-only sexuality education curriculum and the comprehensive sexuality education curriculum “direct knowers to feel sure, optimistic, and free. Both curricula evidence longings for stable knowledge and guaranteed meanings. Finally, learners are directed to feel that knowledge can solve all problems smoothly and happily. Mistakes, negativism, and confusion are excluded from both sets of sexual knowledge… At the affective level, this analysis described a strong positivist and optimistic orientation in sexuality curricula, which marginalizes and subordinates confusion, negativity, failures, misrecognitions, and other ‘bad feelings’” (Lesko 2010: 293). It might be necessary to rethink ‘negative affects’ for sexuality education as well as for adolescent masculinities.

**Concluding Remarks**

The limits of sexuality education is revealed in an absence of ‘negative affects’ and an understanding of adolescent masculinity as stable, violent and predatory. In this chapter I have explored adolescent romantic masculinities to understand both the gaps in our thinking about male desire as well as sexuality education. What follows this is two-fold: the need to include ‘negative feelings’ within sexuality education curriculum as well as to rethink the ‘orientation’ of sexuality education itself. The latter is necessary since sexuality education starts by assuming that boys are either sexually ignorant, or in a position of power, or that their desire is automatic. What if sexuality education started with the idea that the romantic subjectivity of adolescent boys is equally unstable and constituted by the ‘negative affects’ of confusion, awkwardness, shyness, failure, regret and so on? How do these ideas of uncertainty and instability change our conceptions and practice of sexuality education; and what happens to sexuality education if we start seriously acknowledging ambivalence,
‘negative affects’ and loss? While this chapter has lead me to unpack urban adolescent middle class romance it has also brought to the fore the importance of affect and ‘negative feelings’ for sexuality education; and it is in following these up that there might be a possibility to think afresh the ‘orientation’ of sexuality education today.