

Interrogating Cityscape: Alternative Sexuality Versus Male Homophobia In R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*

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ABSTRACT: Henri Lefebvre is of the opinion that every society produces its own space. Sex and sexuality cannot be decoupled from space. Yi-Fu Tuan associates city with freedom and openness. R. Raj Rao's cult novel *The Boyfriend* has Bombay as its backdrop. The first section of my paper will give a brief overview of the setting of the text. The second section will take recourse to the theorists mentioned above to examine how Bombay produces queer spaces. Lastly, I will read select passages within a queer theoretical framework to understand the entanglement between the queer body and society.

KEYWORDS: Bombay, space, gay men, heteronormativity.

INTRODUCTION

Setting refers to the where and when of a story. The characters of any novel need a context to exist, and we cannot imagine a story without it. Bombay is the setting of many fictional works. To quote Pinto & Fernandes: "Everyone has a Bombay story, a Bombay they want represented. And everyone's Bombay is not the Bombay we thought we knew" (Pinto and Fernandes xii). Salman Rushdie who spent most of his childhood in Bombay depicts Bombay in *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Sujata Patel has books *Bombay and Mumbai: The City in Transition*, *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India*, and *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture* to her credit. Bombay is the setting of R. Raj Rao's cult novel *The Boyfriend*. His text revolves around incidents and events that take place in Bombay. What Rao presents is a new image of the city. When his collection of short stories *One Day Locked My Flat in Soul City* came out,

James Gerein opined that Rao should try being “less cosmopolitan and international in his settings” (225). His review might have influenced Rao’s later stories, and that becomes transparent in *The Boyfriend* where the setting is the city where Rao was born and brought up. In the very first chapter of *The Boyfriend*, the hidden gay subculture of the nineties of Bombay is explicitly portrayed. Yudi, a bachelor, is in his forties. He, one of the chief protagonists of the novel, frequents the loo at the Churchgate station and picks up boys randomly, especially those belonging to the working class for casual sex. He collects all the available information related to public loos in South Bombay where gay eroticism materializes. Yudi enjoys a promiscuous lifestyle and frequently has sex in public locations. *The Boyfriend* has multiple references to gay bars, modelling agency, cruising parks, which are reserved for only gay men. Milind, a working-class boy, visits the loo too. Yudi’s quest for sexual gratification remains repetitive until he becomes emotionally involved with Milind. Though love is not their first prerogative, yet it develops gradually. An interesting turn in the plot occurs when Milind disappears and is hired by a modelling agency. Only are the readers aware of the whereabouts of Milind. Milind surfaces towards the last part of the novel, only to get married to a girl chosen by his parents and to end all his relations with Yudi. Milind’s family marries him off to a woman of his caste, and he severs all contact with Yudi. The time period of the novel is the early-nineties when Bombay was a site of communal riots sparked off by the demolition of Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists in Ayodha. In Rao’s fiction, the history of the nation becomes the symbolic context of Yudi and Milind’s relationship.

SPACE AND TRANSGRESSION

The word “space” is synonymous with words such as infinite, limitless, and unrestricted. Rene Descartes rejected the Aristotelian based Scholastic conception of natural phenomenon, and he was the first to equate the essence of a material thing with three-dimensional spatial extension. It was Immanuel Kant who revived the old notion of space and said that space belongs to the realm of consciousness of the subject. For him, space is subjective and ideal. Foucault has a different idea of space, and he asserts that knowledge is a space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse (Lefebvre 1-4). Lefebvre’s notion of space seems pertinent while talking about the production of space. Lefebvre says, “every society...produces a space, its own space” (31). To quote Lefebvre:

Social space thus remains the space of society, of social life. Man does not live by words alone; all subjects are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify. (35)

Bombay produces its own space. Lynda Johnston and Robert Longhurst opine: “cities have often been regarded as spaces of social and sexual liberation because of a perception that they offer anonymity and escape from the familiar and community relations of small towns and villages” (80). Kamdar in her essay “Bombay/Mumbai: The Postmodern city” writes that “Bombay is India’s America, a beacon of opportunity for the country’s huddled masses” (78). She adds: “People come to live their dreams. Everyone comes to Bombay for the same reason: for the opportunity to reinvent oneself, to make one-self over, to make it big” (81). Cities are full of opportunities. People like to settle in cities for the various kinds of opportunities that knock at their doors. Ram Naidu, a gay man, interviewed by Rao, says: “In Pune, I had all the freedom I desired, and realised without a shadow of doubt that I preferred men. So during my first two years in college, I just chilled out, slept with 100 different men...” (Rao and Sarma 51). Parmesh Shahani in his book *Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (Be)Longing* traces the growth of Gay Bombay—an offline-online community—that was formed in the 1990s. It started from the late 1990s till the recent date. Prior to that, the city witnessed the growth of political and sexual health-oriented activism. It was largely symbolized by the Ashok Row Kavi led Bombay Dost—first gay magazine—established in 1990 and the Humsafar Trust. In Ashok Row Kavi’s words, “Bombay in the 1970s and 1980s was ripe for a gay sub culture...a distinct class of salaried professionals had a firm grip on the city’s cultural life” (19). Gay parties were hosted in places like Matunga and Ghatkopar. Bombay has the distinguished position of being the gay capital of India. To quote Shahani:

Indeed, there was a rollicking time...popular cruising spots included the Chowpatty beach, the Gateway of India promenade, certain public gardens and train stations and of course, train compartments...Bombay’s first gay hangout was a tiny bar called Gokul...Saturday evenings at Gokul’s become a regular event on the gay social calendar of Bombay in the 1980s. (83-4)

Yi-Fu Tuan makes a distinction between space and place. Tuan opines that place is security while space is freedom (3). Bombay has queer spaces like Testosterone (as mentioned in *The Boyfriend*) where homosexual intimacy materializes. Another such instance

is the loo at the Churchgate station, which is delineated beautifully by Rao. In *The Boyfriend*, Milind and Yudi encounter each other at the loo. The loo is a space frequented by gay men in pursuit of erotic activity. The Azad Maidan, the modelling agency, and the railway compartments function in the same way for gay men who are always in search of a space where there can unsettle the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

CLAUSTROPHOBIC SPACE AND MALE HOMOPHOBIA

In the words of Ruth Vanita:

All laws originate in custom, that is, in the social practice of local communities. Customs change gradually so the change is not startling to people. But when laws are written down, the written law freezes while customs continue to change. It takes time for the written law to catch up with custom. When the written law changes, people panic because they think written law changes practice, whereas in fact, changes in practice precede changes in written law, for example, incompatible spouses used to separate and remarry long before divorce and remarriage became legal. Similarly, same-sex marriages occurred long before laws began to recognize them. (4)

It becomes clear from Ruth Vanita's argument that homosexuality preceded the written law—the law that criminalized homosexuality. In Rohit K. Dasgupta's words: "The heteropatriarchal ideology, through which nationalism was constructed and discussed in India, lead to the erasure of queer sexuality." (17). Menon and Nigam argue that in the Indian context, the heterosexual patriarchal family is the cornerstone and any radical transformative politics is considered as post-national (38-9). RSS is an instance of narrow cultural nationalism, and according to Arundhati Roy, this is the place where "ordinary people march around in khaki shorts and learn that amassing nuclear weapons, religious bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, book burning and outright hatred are ways in which to retrieve a nation's lost identity" (qtd in Kumar 57). Bacchetta writes, "...Hindu nationalists claim that queendom is "not Indian" and that the British brought homosexuality to India... The primary objects of Hindu-nationalist, queerphobic-xenophobic operations have been Muslim men" (143-144). Gay bashing takes place in several parts of the world, and that is imitated in the "gay capital" of India. Gay bashing is a universal phenomenon all over the world, including the West as well as in India and the prevalence of Section 377 gave "gay bashers the upper hand and enables them to go scot-free for crimes that warrant punishment" (Rao and Sarma xxvii). The

domination of the hegemonic ideology of heteronormativity in Bombay in India is likely to affect the ordering of space. According to a male interviewee from the book *Whistling in the Dark*, the cops are insensitive, inhuman, and they catch anybody who they suspect as gay. He narrates one of his incidents that took place at Bombay's Bhayander railway station. A similar incident happened in Pune as well. Each time he was beaten up for bringing a bad name to the Maharashtrians by engaging in same-sex activity, which they consider as impure (Rao and Sarma 180-81). In *The Boyfriend*, Rao depicts the Azad maidan as a cruising place for gay men. After the post-Babri riots, many suspected homosexuals are beaten up and taken to the police station. Milind and Yudi cannot come out of the closet. For them, "closetedness itself is a performance" (Sedgwick 3). And, they have no other way to get out of the heterosexual matrix. When Milind comes to stay with Yudi, Yudi is worried that Milind's visit may smell fishy to his maid Saraswati. His colleagues are aware of his sexual orientation. Yudi's mother wants his son to get married so that there would be someone who would take care of him. Rao narrates:

On his part, although Yudi was radically gay, he respected his mother's old fashioned views and never openly discussed the subject with her. There was a magnificent no man's land between them. Yudi would do as he pleased, and it wouldn't lessen his mom's love for him by even a farthing; but he wouldn't tell her things about himself that disconcerted her. Thus, Yudi could never think of coming out to his mother the way, say, in the twenty-first century, a young and reckless film-maker would-on camera! (193)

Henri Lefebvre argues that "the space...produced also serves as a tool and a thought and of action: that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and of domination, of power" (26). Michel Foucault is interested in the complex and inextricable relationship between power and knowledge, opining that "power produces knowledge...and power and knowledge directly imply each other" (Discipline and Punish, 27). Foucault is critical of the notion that power is held solely by the dominant, used to police, prohibit and censor, and that it is countered oppositionally through resistance: "there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations" (*History of Sexuality*, 94). Foucault posits that:

[power] is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it

embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere...power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (93)

At the heart of disciplinary power are social, governmental, and institutional systems. These systems monitor and police social relations. Power is not external in case of disciplinary power, and it comes from within the individuals. A disciplinary society is formed on the basis of certain regimes of truth and practices. The practices explicitly discipline sexual bodies, reinforce boundaries between normal, sexual relations and deviant relations, shaping attitudes and expectations and thus legitimizing their reproduction. In the space produced by the city, the individuals are bound to adhere to the norms of heteronormativity and regulate their bodies. Milind has no other option than marrying a girl as he has fewer choices. Yudi, at one point of time, says to Milind, “This is Bombay, my love. People mind their own business.” (Rao 82). Do people mind their own business? Yudi’s friend Gauri does not prefer the homosexual relationship between Yudi and Milind. She hates Milind because she loves Yudi even though he is gay. Rao narrates:

She continued to think of him as a possible husband. In his private lingo, she was the „Backbay Reclamation“ kind. She assumed that all men were naturally attracted to women. If something about their sex life had gone awry, there was no reason why they could not be reclaimed, reformed. They could be made to stop being „backbay people“. (52)

It is quite evident in the above-quoted lines the love that Gauri develops for Yudi. Gauri considers homosexuality as curable. She can do anything to get Yudi back. She forgets that “homosexuality is an essence, a fixed and unchanging aspect of the identity of gays and lesbians” (Joseph 2228). Gauri visits Yudi’s apartment to find out why he has been absent from his work. Yudi asks her to go away as he does not want to disappoint her. Yet, Gauri is reluctant to leave. She does not give up easily. As soon as she sees Milind, she grabs him by his collar and utters foul words at him. Milind does not get any clue to what happens. Milind joins Yudi in his tug-of-war with the door and manages to slam the door shut in Gauri’s face. Gauri waits outside and sobs for a short period until the arrival of Saraswati who scolds her

that women are not permitted to enter the apartment. She wants to know his mother's opinion regarding Yudi's sexual preferences. She is curious to know why she does not force him to get married. R. Raj Rao expresses the inner turmoil of Yudi in Chapter II of *The Boyfriend* beautifully. Rao writes:

Trouble was, where would he find such a person? There were no swayamwars for homos, where one could choose the toughest muscles, who broke a bow with a soldier's ease! Nor could one issue a classified ad in the matrimonial columns of The Times of India. (39)

CONCLUSION

A city is a place where the hegemonic class or the class in power exerts their power through different mechanisms. Ideological state apparatuses are diverse ways to propagate the discourse of heteronormativity. In *The Boyfriend* Bombay is shown as a space where sexual norms are transgressed. Yudi's apartment, the gay bar, the modelling agency, the loo, etc., are avenues of escape. These queer spaces are liminal spaces that offer a kind of alternative to the disciplines and routines of modern city life. The city epitomizes rationality and heteronormativity, whereas the liminal spaces valorise the play of human sexuality. The city becomes a metaphor for closeted gay men. Most of the people are unaware of queer spaces. Though the city offers anonymity, Milind and Yudi are always under surveillance. The novel depicts the dynamics of male homophobia, the irrational fear or intolerance of gay men, that serves the function of keeping men within the boundaries of traditionally defined role. Bombay becomes a site of contradictions- it produces queer spaces, and it is also a place where sexuality is politicized.

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