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Communal Tensions: Homosexuality in Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*

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Introduction

A speechless Yudi welcomed his Milya with open arms. He wasn't at all bitter about the manner in which Milya had dumped him. He was too old for self-respect, and too much in love. Tears flowed down his cheeks. His heart was full of gratitude and joy, so that when his prodigal lover complained about how long he had walked, Yudi sat the boy down and knelt before him to massage his chapped and weary feet.

From the far end of the room, two pairs of eyes watched Yudi risk rebirth as a shit-worm by touching the feet of a Bhangi. The eyes belonged to Gauri. (Rao, 2003, p.226-227)

In this scene from Raj Rao's novel *The Boyfriend*, Yudi, the well-educated and affluent Brahmin protagonist, is welcoming back his Dalit lover, Milind, after a prolonged separation. There appears to be an inversion of the inequities of power when romantic relationships straddle differences in age, class and caste, but the tone is not celebratory. Implicit in the hyperbolic description of Yudi's "speechless" reaction of "joy" and "tears" is a critique of his servility, refracted through the eyes of the ostensibly liberal but ultimately conservative Gauri. *The Boyfriend* presents Yudi's Brahminism as one of the ineluctable constituents of identity which coexist and overlap with his self-consciously Westernised homosexual¹ orientation and preclude its ideal embodiment. In addition to spotlighting the Brahmin/Dalit divide, Rao polarises Yudi and Milind by insisting that the former self-identifies as "radically gay", while the latter falls below the radar of Anglophone identity politics (p.193). Even when the two men are sexually or romantically united, they are separated by the ideological differences embedded in their class and caste, a leitmotif which contributes to Rao's depiction of Yudi's more general social alienation. In this article I argue that in *The Boyfriend*, dubbed a 'cult classic' by readers and scholars alike, Rao hints at an essentialist, sacrosanct homosexuality which has the potential to unite men who love and have sex with men as a result of their shared abjection. In practice, however, gay identity intersects with and is exposed to the deleterious effects of other identity markers like class, caste and religion, and Rao

¹I have used the terms 'gay' and 'homosexual' interchangeably in this essay. While obviously distinct, both imply an initially Euro-American conception of an essential orientation predicated on same-sex desire, following Michel Foucault's (1998) claim, so frequently cited that it now seems axiomatic, that homosexuality was an invention of the nineteenth century. By contrast, many men who have sex with men (MSM) do not consider their sexual practices and desires to form part of their identity.

presents this social determinism in a pessimistic tone which occasionally borders on nihilism. Subsequently, I show how he aligns homosexuality with wider debates on religious communalism and nationhood in order to centralise its importance and emphasise the function of his novel as irreverent social critique.

A lecturer in English at the University of Pune, Raj Rao wrote his doctoral dissertation at Bombay University on the poems of Nissim Ezekiel. While his poetry is similarly conversational, he is distanced from his mentor by his scatological diction and sexual voyeurism, which Hoshang Merchant (2009) describes as “tearing the veils of linguistic gentility” (p.166). At Pune Rao has inaugurated courses in gay literature and queer studies, but, despite his self-identification as gay, homosexual or queer, his writing makes clear that he acknowledges the contingency of these terms and is attentive to the numerous alternative identity markers available in India. In *The Boyfriend* and his 2010 novel *Hostel Room 131* he adduces both LGBT movements and longer-standing non-normative South Asian sexual and gender identities like those of the *hijra* and *kothi*².

In his introduction to *Whistling in the Dark* (2009), Rao makes explicit his mobilisation of the signifier 'gay' in the name of activism, and this strategic deployment has a correlative in his interest in queer politics. What he calls “the intrinsic quality of resistance built into queerness” (p.xv) echoes the idealism surrounding the term as it was co-opted by queer theory in the Anglo-American academic establishment of the early 1990s, in the wake of the formation of the anti-homophobic umbrella group Queer Nation in New York. Andrew Grossman (2001) dubs Rao a “radical utopian” (p.299); present in much of his academic and creative writing on queer themes, this stance is particularly salient in the introduction to *Whistling in the Dark*, where he analyses Foucault’s oft-cited remark on the normalisation of homosexuality as an identity category:

The French philosopher Foucault says: “One day the question, ‘Are you homosexual?’ will be as natural as the question, ‘Are you a bachelor?’”

This is a utopian statement, the signifier ‘one day’ pointing to the idealised future. Also, ‘bachelor’, unlike homosexual, is a neutral construct that implies a deferring of judgement, as well as an expression of choice – the choice to stay single. (p.xviii)

Rao only provides a partial quotation of Foucault (1996), whose full assertion is as follows:

The problem is still very current: between the affirmation “I am homosexual” and the refusal to say it, lies a very ambiguous dialectic. It’s a necessary affirmation since it is the affirmation of a right, but at the same time it’s a cage and a trap. One day the question “Are you a homosexual?” will be as natural as the question “Are you a bachelor?” But, after all, why would one subscribe to this obligation to choose? One can never stabilize oneself in a position; one must define the use that one makes of it according to the moment. (p.369)

²A *kothi* is a biological male who adopts the receptive position in male-male oral and anal sex and usually self-identifies as female; a *hijra* is loosely translatable as a eunuch, or a male-to-female transvestite or transsexual.

Foucault's stance is not, as Rao suggests, "utopian". He does briefly hint at an idealised future, but his statement regarding the impossibility of stabilising "oneself in a position" suggests that a linear progression towards a telos of egalitarianism is simply not possible: "homosexual" and "bachelor" can never achieve absolute parity because their usage can never be static. Rao has selectively marshalled Foucault's words not to debunk "utopian statements", but to consolidate his own brand of queer utopianism through careful differentiation. By focusing on the distinction between the terms "bachelor" and "homosexual", instead of Foucault's insistence on their epistemological and ontological instability, he begins to suggest that queerness is substantive and cannot have equivalence with other denotations of identity.

Hence he argues:

What does gay identity mean? It means, for one, that though we possess multiple identities and are fragmented subjects, identity based on sexual orientation is not subsumed by previous categories of race, class and gender. If these identities intrude, so that a white gay man foregrounds skin colour in his dealings with a gay Asian or African, or a gay prince like Prince Manvendra, a contemporary Rajput prince from Rajpipla, Gujarat, foregrounds class in his dealings with, say, a gay servant in his father's palace, then perhaps it is time for queerness to secede from the union of identity markers, and establish itself as an autonomous category. (p.xviii-xix)

Rao's rhetoric of intrusion recognises that in practice "gay identity" can be violently and unjustly compromised by other identifications, but he suggests that homosexuality must be subsumptive if it is to have any utility. This position is tenuous, particularly in a nation as pluralist as India, where factors such as class, caste, race, religion, language and birthplace are invoked in the formulation of identity, inevitably overlapping with and often superseding the self-identifications of 'gay', 'queer' and 'homosexual'. The incipient call for an autonomous and unalloyed queerness surely betrays a utopianism far greater than that of a Foucault.

The Boyfriend can be read as an extended disquisition on this problematic of queerness and the "union of identity markers", and Rao's utopia is nowhere in evidence, except, perhaps, as an idealised alternative to the events of the narrative. The novel describes the life of Yudi, a forty-something self-proclaimed gay man who is emphatically middle-class and atheist, qualities which are seen to complement his work as a journalist. Capitalising on the opportunities presented by male homosocial spaces in 1990s Bombay, he enjoys a promiscuous lifestyle and frequently has sex in public locations. He meets and falls in love with a much younger Dalit man, Milind, with whom he has an idiosyncratic and mutually manipulative relationship. Eventually, Milind's family marry him off to a woman of his own caste, and he severs all contact with Yudi. At the end of the novel, Milind, impoverished in his new marriage, returns to Yudi to reinitiate their affair, unashamedly demanding his "pocket money (arrears plus interest)" (p.230). Thus the novel emerges as a cynical exposé of the power struggles engendered by the imbrications of a gay or homosexual identity and other longer-standing identifications in India.

When Yudi first encounters Milind (at this stage going by the false name of Kishore) in Churchgate Station, Rao underscores the vast disparity between them. Yudi is a “prolific freelancer” who is said to earn “at least thirty grand a month”; while he is over forty and “beginning to grey at the temples”, Milind is “a guy in his late teens, twenty at most” (p.3). Their first sexual contact is coextensively divisive:

He brought his left hand towards the young man’s crotch...No sooner was he touched there, than the boy started in fear. How could anyone be so shameless! He gasped silently. Yudi, ignorant of the boy’s confusion, drew closer. The odour of sweat from the young working-class body made his head spin, but then he noticed the lad’s feet. The fellow was wearing slippers. The feet were as shapeless as a leper’s, like the feet of most men who came to Churchgate. The uncut toenails were pallid. There were cracks on the soles, especially visible around the heels. Yuk, Yudi burped. The boy abruptly moved away. (p.6-7)

Yudi and Milind's divergent attitudes are encapsulated in the latter's "silent gasp", a harbinger of the men's consistent inability to express their innermost feelings. Despite the delicate interplay of perspectives here, there is no real connection, impeded as it is by differences in age, class, caste and sexual identity. Yudi objectifies the “working-class” body in his oscillation between fetishism and repulsion, and a pervasive sense of alienation is created by his synecdochic diminution of Milind into disaggregated physical characteristics: “the odour of sweat”, “a pair of slippers” and “uncut toenails”. Rao subsequently develops the men’s physical differences into radical socio-economic inequalities: Milind insists that Yudi lives in a “posh area” and asks him what language he speaks at home. Yudi replies, “English”, “quickly” adding “and Hindi”(p.9) in a half-hearted attempt to downplay the privilege of the Anglophone classes.

In his article “Englishpur ki Kothi”, Alok Gupta (2005) explores the potential divisiveness of language among gay men and exponents of ‘local’ non-normative gender and sexual identities like that of the *kothi*. Describing how he was singled out by a working-class *kothi* because of the assumption that he spoke English, Gupta wryly remarks: “I may also be a homosexual, but I was different. I was a cunning ambassador of the English-speaking people. Not just that, I was from an exclusive, inaccessible-to-all and English-speaking domain called ‘Englishpur’” (p.124). While he is drawing attention to the coexistence, imbrications and indeed equivalencies of gay and *kothi* identities, he also demonstrates their inseparability from class and education, as indexed by language. Hence Milind cannot understand Yudi’s ‘upper-class’ English and Yudi is unable to follow Milind’s ‘working-class’ Marathi, a sociolinguistic divide which partly accounts for their divergent sexual and gender self-identifications.

Before their first sexual encounter, Milind attempts to establish Yudi’s religion, hoping that he is not a “Mohammedan” because “They’re unclean”. The latter remains silent as “he had no desire to educate the boy about the ills of bigotry”(p.9), but his assumption that Milind will blackmail him after sex is equally partisan, recalling his antagonistic reactions of attraction and repulsion in Churchgate. Although Yudi seeks such subaltern men out as lovers, his ambivalence is bound up with the ineffaceable sense

of superiority of the higher classes. In Rao's (2005) poem "Underground", recapitulated in the collection *Gay Bombay*, he reveals the fragility of this complacency. Here the upper middle class gay man is forced to acknowledge that Bombay is "the mafia world/of nightly blackmailers", where, after making sexual overtures towards another man in the public toilets, he is threatened: "You want to throw loo goo on his face./ But you give in meekly,/ Handing over cash and valuables./ The meek shan't inherit./ You stand bereft,/ The city your headload" (p.15). The poem creates an atmosphere of rage and helplessness in the face of blackmail, underlined by the scatological impulse to "throw loo goo" at the blackmailer, the hyperbole of "bereft" with its associations of death, and the final metaphor of the "headload", which transforms the upper middle class gay man into a coolie oppressed by the entire city and its denizens. In contrast with Yudi's contradictory position, the poetic persona advocates a simple link between homosexuality and abjection.

Siddharth, the middle-class protagonist of *Hostel Room 131*, also lives in constant isolation as a result of his obsession with a younger man from the lower classes, but his apartness is fleshed out more coherently than Yudi's, especially in contradistinction to the collectives of *kothis* and *hijras* whom he periodically encounters. As he bitterly remarks: "Here are deviants who see the sense of hanging around together, although devoid of education. We, of the middle classes, on the other hand, learned and all, myopically remain islands unto ourselves" (Rao, 2010, p.159). Dialogising with that of the close-knit group he is observing, Siddharth's gay identity loses its connotations of separatist communities and activism and is instilled with the isolationism of individuals. This is not Rao's utopia where homosexuality can form collectives based on social ostracism, because "education" has created multiple allegiances which superannuate a singular identity of sexual or gender non-normativity.

In *The Boyfriend* Rao hints at the possibility of an ideal homosexual community, only to disavow it and therefore reinforce the inescapability of other identity formations. This is evident in his description of Yudi and Milind's first penetrative sex:

Whenever Yudi picked up strangers and took them home, he gladly offered them the active role in bed. He had a theory based on years of experience. As long as men were allowed to penetrate, there was no fear of their returning afterwards to demand money or to beat you up. Some even thought it beneath their dignity to accept cash from someone they had buggered. For such a person, according to them, was at best a hijra. And their heroism and sense of valour did not permit them to assault a eunuch. It was only when these men were penetrated that they became wounded tigers. They felt emasculated. They could then even murder. Currency notes, wristwatches, walkmans, sneakers, were not compensation enough; these couldn't restore their lost masculinity. They accepted the presents with one hand and put a knife in your back with the other. (p.11)

Rao suggests that male-male sex acts can produce their own nexus of identity markers which may be empowering or disabling. Gayatri Reddy (2005) aptly identifies that the terms 'homosexual' and 'gay', although historically constructed in different ways, do not

in themselves specify receptive/penetrative sexual roles, unlike longer-standing identities in India such as those of the *panthi*, *kothi* and *hijra*. For the working-class men whom Yudi seduces, the binary opposition of penetrator/penetratee is inseparable from that of man/*hijra*, implying that they cannot conceive of a 'versatile' and 'egalitarian' homosexuality uninflected by Indian accounts of gender normativity. Yudi's gay identity, despite its apparent aloofness from such low-class and -caste conceptualisations, is not impervious to them, and the novel depicts the slippage between knowingly playing the role of the 'feminine' *hijra* in sexual intercourse and adopting 'womanly' characteristics, as refracted by masculinist paradigms, in a male-male relationship.

Receptive anal sex is stigmatised by many of the characters in *The Boyfriend* and *Hostel Room 131*, and it is significant that the term *gandu*, 'one who has his anus taken', is still a prevalent insult in Northern India. Proffering a cogent explication for such phenomena, Indrani Chatterjee (2002) traces a genealogy of the active/passive binary along the axis of slavery, arguing that historically in South Asia a ruler or social superior could penetrate an inferior, but the inversion of this unwritten law invited derision and punishment. In this description of Yudi's first anal sex with Milind, while portraying identitarian preconceptions as deterministic, Rao simultaneously refuses to replicate the historical connection between wealth- and class-based privilege and sexual roles. Having repeatedly emphasised Yudi's financial and class sovereignty over Milind, he inverts the master/slave and active/passive binaries by making the younger man penetrate the older. It is suggested that the sex act itself holds sway over all money-, class- and caste-based authority, and a litany of presents, "currency notes, wristwatches, walkmans, sneakers", is insufficient to placate the metaphorical "wounded tiger", however poor and abject he may be. Rao toys with two idealistic positions here. Firstly, the inversion of Yudi and Milind's social status suggests that penetrative anal sex can level class differences; secondly, this sex act seems to be outside the usual economies of gifts and bribery. But even as this idealistic stance is insinuated, Yudi and Milind's positioning could be subject to a radically different interpretation: this new inverted order is based on the avoidance of blackmail and violence, and a refusal of the working-class man to accede to Rao's idealised notion of homosexuality. Such men, he suggests elsewhere, are merely MSM, whose "implicit sense of denial" requires "counselling" (2009, p.xx). In *The Boyfriend* he ultimately repudiates the possibility that male-male penetrative sex can democratise power relations in the outside world, merely reinvesting these hierarchies with alternative models of exploitation and pathology.

Rao adopts a comparable strategy of inversion regarding Milind's *Dalit* and Yudi's Brahmin status; when Milind warns him that he is an untouchable, Yudi responds:

"May I kiss you on the mouth?"... It was his way of demonstrating that he cared two fucks if Milind was a Brahman or a Bhangi, whose ancestors cleaned the shit of others...

The more down-and-out Milind was, the more they would click. Outcastes, after all, can only expect to be friends with outcastes. (p.74)

Yudi's playful alliteration of "Brahman" and "Bhangi" appears to break down the gulf between the two, a gesture reinforced by his hyperbolic vision of his own abjection as an

“outcaste”. We recall Rao’s insistence on the parity of the homosexual and the coolie/peon in “Underground”, but Yudi's choice to live as openly gay is not analogous to the determinism of Milind's caste inheritance. In both cases their putative camaraderie is dictated by the upper middle class Brahmin, and degrees of marginalisation go unacknowledged; an untouchable who visibly loves and has sex with men undoubtedly has less social currency than his upper-caste gay counterpart.

Rao does not allow Yudi’s idealistic vision to go unchecked, instead revealing it as illogical and contradictory. To ascertain whether or not Yudi is really troubled by his caste, Milind exhorts him to eat several wafers which he has half consumed, and Yudi reacts furiously:

“Homos are no different from Bhangis. Both are Untouchables. So why should I have a problem with eating your jootha?”

“But you are a Brahman, aren’t you?”

“No, I am a homosexual. Gay by caste. Gay by religion.”

“I don’t understand what you are saying.”

“What I am saying is that homosexuals have no caste or religion. They have only their homosexuality.”

“How can that be?”

“That’s how it is. Straight people are Brahmans, gays Shudras. So you see, both you and I are Shudras. That’s why we are best friends.”

At some intuitive level, Milind suspected that Yudi was talking sense. He was in no position, however, to understand the intricacies of the argument. (p.81-82)

Yudi's claim to have "only [his] homosexuality" paraphrases Rao’s idealism: “It is time for queerness to secede from the union of identity markers, and establish itself as an autonomous category.” In isolating homosexuality as ontologically distinct from caste and religion, Yudi is suggesting that it cannot have parity with other constituents of identity, but this idealistic position again seems unrealisable, as it is impossible for Yudi and Milind to conceive of placing homosexuality outside the corral of other markers of identity like class and caste. Yudi is only able to explicate his beliefs by incorporating an analogy which locates homosexuality and caste within the same ontological schema and thus the same matrix of power: “Straight people are Brahmans, gays Shudras.” Milind's confusion points to the more general impossibility of Yudi's queer utopia, because to dislocate queerness from identity and establish it as a new category is paradoxical, as categorisation and identification are inseparable. Yudi’s insistence that the two men are Shudras together is itself inextricably linked to disequilibria of power; he claims an equivalence with homosexuality, but betrays his ignorance and indifference by using Bhangi, Untouchable and Shudra interchangeably, when the three terms have radically different significations. Having never experienced the privations and degradations of the lowest castes, he never displays any real understanding of the conditions of their

existence, and his intellectualisation of the problem is, for Milind, too recondite to fulfil its ostensibly explanatory purpose.

However much he protests, Yudi cannot escape what Mulk Raj Anand (2005) in his 1935 novel *Untouchable* calls “six thousand years of racial and class superiority” (p.16): the homosexual relationship can never be disentangled from the complex networks of class, caste, religion, and other expressions and determinants of power. Observing the gigantic statue of the Jain saint Gomateshwara in the city of Shravanabelagola, Yudi is about to make an inflammatory remark on the size of its genitals, and the two men quarrel again:

“Shut up!” Milind snapped. “Have some respect for a sacred place. You’re so educated, yet you talk such rubbish!”

“Let me put it this way,” said Yudi, not accustomed to being snubbed. “I talk rubbish because I’m educated. At least I have something to say. You illiterates are slaves. You only say what people allow you to!” (p.126)

Confounding Milind’s lack of education with his menial status, Yudi reveals his earlier affirmation of their shared untouchability to be hollow. Rao is suggesting that gay idealism as espoused by a Yudi is at best contradictory, at worst hypocritical, because homosexuality is continually obfuscated by his greater attachment to the other markers of identity which constitute his inevitably socialised subjectivity. *The Boyfriend* painstakingly demonstrates that Yudi and Milind are separated by class, caste, age, language, education and religion, and, in a society where such formulations constantly militate against fulfilling relationships, even gay idealism cannot emerge untainted by social conditioning. Rao’s position recalls that of Dennis Altman (2001), who claims of the ‘developing world’:

The romantic myth of homosexual identity cutting across class, race, and so on doesn’t work in practice any more than it does in the West. The experience of sexuality in everyday life is shaped by such variables as the gap between city and country; ethnic and religious differences; and hierarchies of health, education, and age. The idea of a gay or lesbian/gay community assumes that such differences can be subordinated to an overarching sense of sexual identity, a myth that is barely sustainable in comparatively rich and affluent societies. (p.34)

Altman introduces this caveat as part of a list of the challenges which “a discussion of new or modern homosexualities” (p.34) will have to face. Here and elsewhere in his work, modernisation and the internationalisation of gay identity are problematically synonymous, although he does usefully highlight the imbrications of an initially Euro-American model of homosexuality and other identifications in countries such as India. Altman does not simply celebrate the internationalisation of gay or queer identity, whereas Rao, as I have argued, idealises its potential for forming collectives of men united by the experience of an essential orientation in the face of widespread discrimination. At the same time, in *The Boyfriend* he recognises it as a “romantic myth” - such idealism is not untenable, but it is abstracted from the often violent processes of subject constitution in 1990s Bombay.

If the principal mode of *The Boyfriend* is critique, this is intensified by Rao's descriptions of communal anxieties and clashes, including those engendered by the Dalit Ambedkarites as they march to Chaitya Bhoomi, where B.R. Ambedkar's last rites were performed. Rao's reference to the Hindu demolition of the Babri Masjid and the nationwide riots which followed epitomises his critique of inflammatory identitarian politics. The description of how Yudi and Milind are affected by the riots is brief, but this moment of sectarian strife haunts the novel, just as the demolition of the Masjid has plagued the national imagination for almost two decades. The Babri Masjid was constructed by the Mughal emperor Babur in 1527 in Ayodhya, on the exact spot which many Hindus consider to be the birthplace of Lord Rama, avatar of Vishnu and hero of the *Ramayana*. According to some Hindus, the Masjid was built after Mir Baqi, Babur's general and the viceroy of the region, had destroyed a pre-existing Hindu temple on the site. The majority of Muslims, however, dispute the legitimacy of the Hindu account. On December 6, 1992, after a century and a half of communal tensions surrounding the Masjid, and extensive campaigning between 1989 and 1990 by the BJP, a group of Hindu *karsevaks* (volunteers) stormed the building and reduced it to rubble. The aftermath included several months of intercommunal Hindu-Muslim rioting across the country, during which time at least 2,000 people lost their lives. The destruction of the Babri Masjid represented a day, in the words of Ram Puniyani (2003), when "most of the people who believed in the values emerging from India's freedom struggle – the values of democracy and secularism – hung their heads in shame. It was a day when many people in this group felt that it marked a major onslaught on the principles enshrined in the Indian constitution" (p.123).

Rao depicts this event with characteristic sardonicism:

In the eight months since Yudi and Kishore met, Bombay was ravaged by fierce religious riots. In December 1992, Hindu mobs demolished the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, Lord Ram's birthplace. Then they slaughtered angry Muslims who dared to rise up and give the fanatics a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye. What they were saying was that if Muslims wanted to live in India and not be bundled off to Pakistan in another infamous train, they would have to put up with every kind of humiliation, including the razing of mosques. They had lost the right to ask questions the day they had converted to the 'conqueror's' faith. What was puzzling, however, was that Bombay bore the brunt of what had gone wrong in Ayodhya, a city with which it has as little in common as pizzas have with pooris. (p.40)

It is suggested that the interlocking identity categories of the present are doubly immovable because they are burdened by the weight of the past. The tone is litotic, but Rao appears to sympathise with the suffering Muslims, depicting ironically in free indirect speech the Hindu outrage that they "dared to rise up", despite their putative illegitimacy, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid. He continues to use free indirect speech to represent the Right-wing Hindus' approval of the massacre of Muslims surrounding Partition in 1947, as well as their portrayal of Indian Islam as the result of a series of alien Mughal invasions, in opposition to the implied autochthonous legitimacy of Hinduism.

Equally schismatic is the analogy of “pizzas” and “pooris”, which clearly signifies Bombay's liberal Westernisation and Ayodhya's centralisation of 'Indian tradition'. Within the nation they seem diametrically opposed, but their convergence in times of Hindu nationalism and communalism implies that the relationship is not so simple, that Bombay's liberalism is inevitably tempered and encroached on by reactionary politics.

When Yudi is searching for Milind after the riots, he concludes that “it was unlikely that Kishore would be alive” (p.41), and it latterly emerges in Milind's account that he, although neither Hindu nor Muslim, is embroiled in the brutality of communalism. As he is walking along the railway tracks, he becomes part of a group of Muslims who are fleeing Hindu persecution, and it is only his decision to hide under an empty train which prevents him from being “slaughtered...as goats are slaughtered at Deonar” (p.79). Milind becomes a target simply because he seems to be part of the group, revealing the ultimate indiscriminacy of what began as persecution based on conflicting religious ideology. Yet these experiences do not transform his perceptions: “Of course I am unhappy. The Muslims are our friends, even though they are dirty and I wouldn't really spend time with them. I hate the Brahmans and the Marathas, the VHP and the RSS...”(p.79). Rao satirises the contradictoriness of Milind's opinions, but he also implies the disjunction between tolerance and acceptance: national aspirations of mutual tolerance, rooted in Nehru's ideal of the democratic secular nation state, do nothing to neutralise communal tensions; in fact, they are barely capable of concealing them.

Rao's purpose in evoking such moments of communalism is to adumbrate the failure of the egalitarian ideals enshrined in the national constitution and the principles of democracy, partly to parallel the vitiation of the democratising potential of homosexuality by more pressing identifications. As Milind subsequently remarks: “When I was thirteen, I was in the RSS...The gandus enrolled me in their party, even though they knew I was a Dalit” (p.79). To reiterate, the pejorative label *gandu* suggests both a general insult and a specific reference to the passive partner in male-male sexual intercourse, nuances which the Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal (1999) captures in his famous Marathi poem, “Gandu Bagicha” (“Arsefuckers' Park”), first published in 1989. The ending is relevant here:

The widow gladdens her heart
 The cripples play kabaddi
 The lame sleep under rags
 The leper cracks what's left of his knuckles
 Homosexuals screw each other
 to the strains of the nation's anthem (p.75)

The literal and metaphorical dimensions of *gandu* are conflated in the park: while it is full of “arse-fucking” homosexuals, this bleak expanse and its subaltern denizens, including but not limited to Dalits, are also irretrievably inferior and beyond the pale of respectable nationhood. By mapping the use of *gandu* as a means of literal and metaphorical

othering, Dhasal shows how Milind can reject the right-wing Hindu nationalist as simultaneously sexually passive and inferior. Milind's words echo how communalists in India often invoke the effeminacy and degenerate sexuality of their opponents in their denigrations; for instance, Muslims in Hindu nationalist discourse are still frequently figured as the licentious alien, whose overweening sexuality or homosexuality is a threat to society, as Paola Bacchetta (1999) has persuasively analysed. In this movement, as in many others throughout the novel, Rao striates communal prejudice with an intolerance of homosexuality, also demonstrating how the metaphorical application of *gandu* in different social contexts necessarily inflects its literal usage, problematising the secession of gay identity "from the union of identity markers". There emerges a diachronic approach to irruptive moments in Indian history and their effects on contemporary homosexual subjectivity and existence, but ambivalence predominates. On the one hand, Rao aligns love and sex between men with wider national debates on tolerance and the dissolution of identitarian violence, implying a central legitimacy for homosexuality as part of a secular, democratic, pan-Indian ideal, and asserting the importance of critique to the ongoing project of nation-building. On the other hand, his attitude towards the possibility of eradicating these communal tensions is pessimistic, perhaps verging on defeatism.

The analogy with Yudi is striking: surrounded by multiple identifications, some of which he internalises, he cannot perform Rao's ideal homosexuality, and in *The Boyfriend* it never manages to "establish itself as an autonomous category." If the novel hints at the dissolution of hierarchies by means of the shared abjection of homosexuals, Rao maps the inevitable failure of this gesture in order to underscore the ineluctability of other constituents of identity in contemporary India. He implies that the gay man's efforts to evade the incursions of identity markers like class, caste and religion do not result in new collectives but merely a dangerous solipsism and alienation from the world around him. Hence Yudi's simultaneous attraction and aversion to subaltern men is entirely motivated by an irreducible sense of class difference. Even long-term relationships do not promise solidarity because these men do not see male-male love and sex as constitutive of an essential orientation or identitarian core. Rao's idealistic vision is still far from fruition, but it haunts *The Boyfriend* as an unrealised counternarrative, a muted exhortation for social and political change.

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