

Gay Subculture and the Cities in India: A Critical Reading of Select Works of R Raj Rao

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Abstract

In delineating the painful experiences of LGBTQ individuals after the introduction of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code R Raj Rao's works look into the struggle of these people to survive the onslaught of normative sexual discourses. Given the fact that Queer sexuality has been continuously questioned, suspected and tormented prior to its legitimate recognition in 2018, Rao draws attention to the nuances of gay urban life in India. The paper critically analyses the representation of gay subculture in the cities of India as reflected in select works of Rao. It demystifies how gay people share the urban space, manage to make room for their pleasure in the cities, and pose a threat to the dominant understanding of sexuality. The ultimate objective of this paper is to understand the role of the city in the (un)making of subcultural identity. Textual analysis, with reference to certain theoretical frameworks, would be used as qualitative research method.

Keywords: Sexuality, subculture, city, normativity, resistance

Introduction

The idea of heterosexuality, as the only 'legitimate' sexual orientation, often overshadows the presence of alternative sexualities, thereby dismissing them as aberrational and slanderous. R Raj Rao brings forth an unconventional treatment of gay sexuality in his writings where he considers gay subculture to be subversive enough to question existing the hetero/ homosexual binary. The city becomes a thrilling presence in the narrative of gay subculture, operating in the urban spaces. The present study intends to unravel the politics, inherent in the relation between gay subculture and the cities. It would examine whether the cities are conducive to resist gender essentialism or the cities end up being a veiled assertion of heteronormativity.

Literature Review

Ketki Ranade in the book titled *Growing up Gay in Urban India: A Critical Psychological Perspective* (2018) pays attention to the psychological experiences of LGBTQ people in urban India and their bid to gain social recognition. Despite the shackles of unethical oppression and hostility towards homosexuality, what seem interesting is the emergence of a recognisable queer community in the urban places of India. Charan Singh and Sunil Gupta's series of extraordinary photography in *Delhi:*



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Communities of Belonging (2016) offers glimpses of the emerging LGBTQ community in contemporary Delhi and the way it maneuvers to question the virile masculine discourses. Quite notably, instead of merely placing forth the narratives of victimhood, the book identifies nuggets of Queer networks, developing in the metropolis and carrying imprints of collective interests. Parmesh Shahani's book titled *Gay Bombay: Globalisation, Love and (Be)longing in Contemporary India* (2008) appears to be groundbreaking in the sense that it not only talks about the gay life in contemporary Mumbai but is also optimistic about the efforts of gay social groups and gay movements to ensure their social acceptability. As an ethnographic study, this book talks about the effect of internet and technology on gay life and refers to a social group named "Gay Bombay" formed in 1998. It might be said that recent studies on the lives of sexual minorities in modern India suggest a kind of transformation in their (homosexual communities) status of living. Moreover, such studies expressly showcase the sustained resistance that these people constitute to interrogate the prevalent gender norms, instead of being a passive recipient of it.

This paper is a literary study (and not ethnographic) aiming to interpret the representation of gay subculture with reference to the question of the cities in India. Apart from the methodological difference, the paper draws itself apart from the preceding studies in terms of the content as well. Unlike the existing studies that primarily focus on the emerging solidarity among non-normative sexualities, this paper would try to understand if the cityscape, at all, has a role to play in the egression of an alternative cultural expression.

Methodology

Methodology for the present study is concerned with close reading of the primary texts in conjunction with certain theoretical frameworks.

Subculture theory would be employed to recover the voices of the marginalised urban subjects who set themselves apart from mainstream norms and values.

The link between the discourses of power and sexuality, as embedded in the texts, is to be analysed by making reference to some of the essays by Michael Foucault. Queer theory would be incorporated to question the essentialist-constructionist problematic that is associated with identity politics. It would help in redefining sexuality in terms of fluidity, contradiction, indeterminacy and multiplicity.

Theory of masculinity is another fundamental paradigm to be used in the work for countering the idea of 'men' as a gendered category. Theory of urbanity would be incorporated in order to problematise the idea of the urban space and how it comes into dialogue with the idea of social space.

Gay Subculture: A Conceptual Category

The idea of 'subculture' refers to a form of cultural resistance to the dominant ideology and it promotes multiple strategies to question marginalisation. In his essay titled "Grow the Beard, Wear the Costume: Resisting Weight and Sexual Orientation Stigmas in the Bear Subculture" Patrick B McGrady proclaims that subculture constitutes resistance towards any forms of stigma

by critiquing those who embody stereotypes.

In 1958 sociologist Jose Fabio Barbosa da Silva approached his thesis on homosexuality by conceptualising homosexuals as a minority group with a distinct subculture. In the book titled *Sexuality and Larger Bodies: Gay Men's Experience of and Resistance against Weight and Sexual Orientation Stigma* (2012) McGrady further dwells on the ways gay men perceive the differences between their own identity and the malign stereotypes that society attributes to them. It is at this juncture the idea of gay subculture becomes important. It not only becomes a tool to question the sexual politics, but also enables gay people to embrace their true identity irrespective of threats, hostility and discrimination.

Viewing gay subculture from the perspective of 'alterity' is quite gripping. In this context one may think of citing the Freudian idea of *return of the repressed*- the inalterability of the repressed. Sigmund Freud in "The Dissection of the Psychological Personality" of his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* suggests "Impressions, ...which have been sunk into the id by repression, are virtually immortal; after the passage of decades, they behave as though they had just occurred" (Freud, 1933, p. 74). In Rao's works the repressed sexual instinct comes out in the form of a defiant attitude towards practices that try to suppress the gay identity. The portrayal of open sensuality acquires a sense of noteworthiness by conveying the message of protest. The "Prologue" of *National Anthem and Other Poems* (2019) amply reflects the outcry of an indomitable spirit: "I'm a terrorist of the spirit/ I know not how to hold a gun/ But know how to wield the pen" (lines 1-3). Rao vehemently questions the social, governmental and institutional systems that perpetuate homophobia in the name of law. His arguments are grounded on "an oppositional reading tactic that relentlessly subverts and dismantles any form of normative interpretation" (Bakshi and Dasgupta, 2019, p. 106). Hence, the act of questioning becomes a critical faculty and is fundamental to the mechanism of Queer culture as Bakshi and Dasgupta explain in *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis* (2019). In retaliation to the abominable oppression of law, the speaker in the following poem ("Outlaw") resolves to be an "outlaw"- a position that gives him power: "What are you then? / You are an ostracised outlaw" (Rao, 2019, p. 28, lines 13-14). The spark of adamance and wildness can be construed as an insignia of the inherent radicalism of gay subculture where people might not overturn the system but continuously assail it by their own distinct ways and practices.

Gay Life in the City: Space, Power and Sexuality

One of the major problematics of the city is the idea of privacy and recession that it provides to its inhabitants. In the book titled *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities* (2010) Johnston and Longhurst elucidate this point quite appropriately, "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 community relations of small towns and villages" (p. 80). The novel titled *Hostel Room 131* (2010) deals with the idea of homosexual love between Siddharth and Sudhir, hailing from Bombay and Belgaum respectively. One can observe the evolution of their relationship in the Engineering college hostel in Pune. The city of Pune becomes a harbinger of possibilities for Sudhir as the city contrasts with his own village Belgaum where homosocial bonding is strictly prohibited. Quite befittingly, Sudhir feels unrestrained and indulges into same sex relationship that leads to

physical intimacies, sexual escapades and theatre hall adventures. The novel describes, "When seized by the sexual urge he (Sudhir) frequented various public parks and loos in the city where men met" (Rao, 2010, p. 139).

Cities, thus, can be called the "Transgressive Territories" – a noteworthy phrase, mentioned in S.M. Chaudhuri's thesis titled *Transgressive Territories: Queer Space in Indian Fiction and Film* (2009). With its anonymity, precariousness and pervasiveness the city provides an uncanny power to sexual minorities for escaping gender oppression. That is why the idea of 'transgression' becomes typical of the city because the city carries potential scopes to dismantle, though partially, the normative practices. Herein, the role of the "built environment" becomes crucial. The meaning of the "built environment" is "generated through personalisation-through taking possession, completing it, changing it" (Rapoport, 1990, p. 21). The novel carries references to such "built environments" where gay people are allowed to form critical engagement with the space, individualise it and foster a sense of sociability and solidarity amongst themselves. Some references from the texts would substantiate this understanding.

The flat in the metropolitan cities is a recurrent image in many of Rao's works. *Crocodile Tears: New and Selected Stories* opens with this bold statement, "when the doorbell unexpectedly rang, we lay naked on the foam mattress in the curtainless bedroom of my 1 BHK apartment" (Rao, 2018, p. 9). This intense sense of privacy inside the flat subverts the laws that discourage same sex activities. The flat, located in the city of Mumbai, is powerful enough to provide secrecy not only to the owner but also to his partner who hails from the public world at large. It can be interpreted that the metropolitan flats make an extraordinary coalition between the public and the private—a partner from the 'public' place is brought into the 'private' world of the flat owner. The flats, thus, provide scope for physical intimacy between two men and keep the encroachment of catastrophic norms at bay. There are several spots in the city of Pune as *Hostel Room 131* (2010) demonstrates—Boys' hostel, Shambhaji Park ("a hot cruising spot in the city"), Liberty Guest House, cinema hall ("Natraj") and even flats, those hold the reputation of being occupied by queer people. The Engineering college hostel also becomes a striking example where robust flavor of homosexual encounters can be experienced. Rao's candor in describing the physical intimacy between Siddharth and Sudhir refutes the conventional impression that an educational institution is invariably associated with academic affairs. Gay couple like Gaurav and Vivek maintain a committed homosexual relationship even within the hostel. They support Sudhir and Siddharth to survive the rampant aggression and anti-homosexual agenda pervaded in the college. The novel describes, "He (Sudhir) wanted to clean up, but if he opened the door to get to the bathroom, Farouq would surely wake up and be witness to their misdemeanours. Nor did the Engineering college provide wash basins in hostel rooms. So, there was no option for Sudhir and Siddharth to lie on the cum" (Rao, 2010, p. 41). Rao terms the 'male bonding' as *yaarana*. However, the required degree of self-sufficiency to exercise this *yaarana* is still a matter of question and dispute in the cities in India. *The Boyfriend* (2003) turns out to be a striking example of how homonormative agendas obfuscate the gay identity and counter the notion of *yaarana*. Homonormativity forces the gay man to embrace the heterosexually privileged behavior, negating their own sexual orientation and desire. In *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2001) Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai reflect on way sexuality becomes a "life and death" issue due to homonormative shackles:

The myth that same-sex love is a disease imported into India contributes to an atmosphere of ignorance that proves dangerous for many Indians. In such an atmosphere, homoerotically inclined people often hate themselves, live in shamed secrecy, try to “cure” themselves by resorting to quacks or forcing themselves into marriage, and even attempt suicide, individually or jointly. (p. xxiv)

In *The Boyfriend* Milind, being forced by the family on financial grounds, marries a woman and sacrifices his love for Yudi. Set at the backdrop of Bombay riots in 1992, the novel, thus, demonstrates the economic crises in the city and the lack of employment, affecting the life of a Dalit boy like Milind and the indigence of his family.

Stephen Whittle, in the book titled *The Margins of the City: Gay Men's Urban Lives* (1994), conducts ethnographic research and brings out the responses of gay men to the development of gay places in foreign cities. The present paper, though reflects on the Indian scenario, intends to employ Whittle's perception. What is interesting in Whittle's argument is the idea of gay bonding, cultivated in the gay places. Rao embarks on this issue by giving a marvelous example in his novel titled *Lady Lolita's Lover* (2015) where he talks about a club named ARSE (Association for the Rights of the Sexually Exploited). This obscene acronym grudgingly mocks the social institutions that disseminate oppressive agenda under the guise of polished disposition. The presence of such clubs in the city of Mumbai not only promotes a distinct subcultural identity for gay men but also provides scopes for emotional ease. Jeevan Reddy, a lawyer by profession, is a member of this “circle of gay friends”-“They met by rotation at each other's homes, located in supremely upmarket neighbourhoods such as Pedder Road, Warden Road, Napean Sea Road, Marine Drive...Cuffe Parade where JR himself lived” (Rao, 2015, p. 195). The club serves as a platform not only to provide solace and privacy to these people but also to engage them into debates and discussion about their position in the society:

The members of ARSE discussed various topics on their agenda and had heated debates about them. They spoke, for example, of the need to make one's sexual orientation a part of one's identity. They talked of multiple queer identities such as gay, bisexual, transgender, hijra and koti. They tracked the progress of a writ petition filed in the Delhi High Court that sought to abolish or at least ‘read down’ an archaic law, popularly known as the anti-sodomy law, that called sex between men ‘unnatural’ and saw it as a criminal offence. (p. 196)

The club generates a different kind of sociability which, very effectively, responds to Lefebvre's theorisation of space in *The Production of Space* (1991)- “every society... produces a space, its own space” (p. 31). The club creates its very own space. It can also be thought as a symbol of the “independent homoland” where “gay hind” is endorsed (Rao, 2019, p. 5).

To discuss the idea of undermining the police surveillance or homonormative agendas, public toilets and gay bars turn out to be extremely important. These informal urban spaces are problematic in the sense that they manipulate the idea of decency and secure possibilities for ‘illicit’ sexual relationships. Such places are the ones where a sense of randomness (also liberty) prevails in picking up partners. The obscene sketches and erotic remarks (written on the walls with phone numbers) seem alluring enough for a gay man to engage himself into physicality. George Simmel in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” says that the individual is debarred from

asserting his or her autonomy in traditional societies; however, with the arrival of urbanisation the individuals enable themselves to assert a distinct identity and choice of their own. The function of the metropolis, as Simmel argues, is "to provide the arena for this struggle, and its reconciliation" (Simmel, 1950, p. 423). Novels like *Lady Lolita's Lover* demonstrate the fact that the urban space occupies scopes for resisting parochialism and rediscovering the self. Aroop's statement in this novel is noteworthy: "I've been to gay bars in all the ports I've sailed to" (Rao, 2015, p. 274). Some of these gay bars hold symbolic names like "Testosterone". The apparent profaneness derides at the sense of sophistication, associated with the (sexual)conduct prescribed by the society. As argued by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that "visibility is a Trap" (Foucault, 1975, p. 200). Rao's writings, very significantly, depict that the cities offer scopes for non-visibility, although at a subcutaneous and limited level.

The City and Biopolitics- An Uneasy Reception of Subculture

While emphasising the variedness of the city Rao makes an interesting comment in the short story titled "The Gun", "This (Mumbai) city fosters angst, amnesia, and absurdity in equal measure" (Rao, 2018, p. 32). People with alternative sexualities may not always find the city-space *homofriendly*. As mentioned in *Whistling in the Dark: Twenty-One Queer Interviews* the dominance of the notorious 377 verdict allows "gay bashers the upper hand and enables them to go scot-free for crimes that warrant punishment" (Rao and Sharma, 2009, p. xxvii). Many of the interviewees recount their horrible experiences as they are thrashed, harassed and detained by inhuman cops, arresting whoever they suspect as gay. Hoshang Merchant, too, complains of the same ordeals that gay people in India confront in their everyday life. In *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia* he says, "Meanwhile poor gays continue to be exploited by the police in Delhi as elsewhere and rich, closet homosexuals continue submitting to blackmail if not murder as at Vasant Vihar, Delhi, and in other parts of India" (Merchant, 2010, p. 254). The instances of tribulations, ridicule, and violence are starkly evident throughout these writings. Thus, the unpredictability of the city makes it problematic for the subculture group to understand whether their position would lead to any sociability or social anxiety.

Raewyn Connell in his essay titled "Masculinities, Power, and Alliance Politics" (2007) theorises the notion of "hegemonic masculinity" in which *masculinity* becomes a grossly gendered category. This normative understanding of masculinity transmits the idea of a definite type of masculinity that has to be necessarily identified by heterosexuality. Rao shows how such discourses debilitate the possibilities of establishing an alternative male identity in the society. In *Hostel Room 131* Sudhir laments: "If I'm a man and am caught having sex with another man, people will call me chhakka or homo- both words of abuse. Why should I allow people to abuse me?" (Rao, 2010, p. 204). He (Sudhir) is forced to reorient his biological sex by undergoing a surgery in order to attain a socially defined 'legitimate' body. This is precisely because homosexual bodies are believed to be 'unnatural' as Foucault explains in *History of Sexuality* (1976). The body, therefore, is never free from sexual politics and contestation. Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* explains how the "body is also directly involved in a political field" (Foucault, 1975, p. 25). Thus, the body is rooted in disciplinary practices. The novel is suggestive of the fact that the (homo)sexual body is perpetually inflicted by the

discourses that are operative through the binarised model of sexuality.

The notion of "Biopolitics" deserves a mention in order to understand how power is exerted on the individual life. Foucault in his *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (1979) explains that both biological and political forces constitute the processes of life. Rao's poem titled "National Anthem" (2019) substantiates the Foucauldian understanding quite astonishingly, "The cops said we were homosexual and anti-national/ and deserved to be sent/ to the land of the pure" (lines 36-38). This is exactly what Sandeep Bakshi, in his article titled "Fractured Resistance: Queer Negotiations of the Postcolonial" (2012), observes. He explains that the postcolonial nation continues to exercise the former colonial project of "policing" the marginalised sexualities. This is how the cities can at times be precarious and transformed into a fundamental apparatus to control non-normative practices.

Findings from the Study

This paper started with a specific query to understand how the cities in India, as reflected in the select writings of R Raj Rao, come into a dialogue with the queer lives. From the discussion it can, thus, be inferred that imagining an unrestrained gay life in the city would border on sheer utopia. Therefore, the quest for an "Independent homoland" (p.5), as Rao phrases it in *National Anthem and Other Poems* (2019), sounds utterly challenging. It might be because the city is never stagnant, rather it evolves in terms of its socio-cultural, political, and spatial discourses and developments. It is a locale where several discourses jostle for space and the dominant discourse might, at times, be challenged or questioned but can never be removed completely. Gay people cannot escape the social and sexual constraints completely in the city, but definitely, can attain some spaces of their own, coming out of the tortures they used to encounter previously.

Conclusion

Rao has always been extremely vocal about his experience of being a gay India. His writings bring forth the diversity of voices, articulating the discourses of urban (homo)sexuality prevalent in India. He boldly proclaims, "Activists might call me reckless but I don't want to conform to norms set by the society" (Bhanage, 2018). In fact, he enjoys the status of being an 'outlaw' in his own country and would always welcome a radically queer position to counter the myth of homophobia- a construct by the mainstream sexual mores. Rao politicises sexuality in the sense that his portrayal of gay subculture becomes a cultural tool to question the mechanism of sexual politics in a heterosexually defined society. When it comes to the issue of gay subculture with relation to the cities, the urban space might be regarded as a locus that produces and refutes homosexual discourses. A kind of indecisive sexual tension pervades the city and it becomes a space for contestation where gay subculture might have a liminal space for gay bonding, but is never free from threats. The nexus between the urban and queer space is, thus, decoded with a critical lens to present the intricacies of gay subculture, tackling the vibe of kinship and the enigma of vulnerability simultaneously.

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