



Finding a Place to Belong: Queer Spaces in R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*

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Abstract- One can never skip R.Raj Rao's 'The Boyfriend', published in 2003 whenever one talks about Indian Queer Writing. His unusual, bold masterpiece comes from carefully showing the real city locations of Bombay and tracing the hidden sexual spaces initializing the 21st century. The study shows that the novel weaves around the real location of the city where one can encounter queer struggle; a perfect spot of relationship based on an exchange of money and sex. The use of dark humour in an unpolished writing style by Rao and ideas from other thinkers like Henri Lefebvre – "right to the city", Michel de Certeau – "tactics" and Gayle Rubin – "traffic in women" makes the study more firm. The strong depiction of the contrasting characters Yudi, a literate upper class fellow and Milind, his young lower caste partner seek opportunities to express themselves in the city of straight people. The study highlights the use of local public places like train, toilet and Marine Drive as the undercover queer community spaces build to find or form connections. The paper also reads the use of raw, unpolished and unashamed language which is a form of political protest. Rao rejects the clean presentation of queer life to be more acceptable to society and present it in its messy form amidst the modern Indian city.

Keywords- R. Raj Rao, *The Boyfriend*, Indian queer literature, urban space, cartography, counter public, caste and sexuality, camp aesthetics, public sex

I. Introduction

Earlier, Indian queer writing was mostly hidden, full of hints or deeply sad, before R. Raj Rao came as the path breaker. He never locked queer life in private spaces of guilt, something to be ashamed of but presented it as it is- harsh, uncomfortable and erotic sometimes. His book was published in 2003 when Section 377 of the Indian Penal Court was still in force. The British law that made "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" a crime, and licensed police to use it to trouble or threaten queer people. 'The Boyfriend' was not just a book but a bold public statement to have both physical space and sexual freedom amidst the environment prevailed then.

Rao employs two main male characters, Yudi a 40-year-old journalist and English professor and Milind a 19-year-old Dalit boy to build a bond for money, sex and company. He tactfully turns the physical city of Bombay to a secret queer city by showing ordinary public spots as queer centres for desire and discovery. The narrative actively builds something that scholar Michael Warner calls a "counter public", a social space with different connections. The city Yudi and Milind were experiencing was not that clean made of families, business and dreams. The public toilet, train compartments, bars and seafronts seemed to be the erotic encounters for them.



The study follows three simple steps. First the idea of space, how Roa reclaims the city into unforgettable queer spots. Second the tangled connection between caste, class and sex evolving through money-based relationship between the privileged, Brahmin Yudi and the Dalit Milind, which reveals the overlapping systems of power in India. Final, the language used by Rao to present not so acceptable version of queer life, where marriage and straight romance are mockery for him.

II. How Desire Maps the City: Taking Back a Space Not Made for You

Rao projects the city of Bombay as a living character by making Yudi constantly interact with it, in 'The Boyfriend'. The Bombay, that Yudi make us to see, is not dirty, dangerous or worth passing by without a second thought but it is the place of erotic charge and temporary community of queer people. He reflects that the city is not just to live in but to shape it and make it a place that reflects your own desires. This idea coincides with that of Henri Lefebvre "right to the city."

The novel starts in the public toilet, a classic queer non-place, the first major point on Yudi's erotic and social map. For him the place is a "great leveller". Here all the differences of caste, class and age disappear to attain the ultimate goal of sexual pleasure. Resembling it with what Michel de Certeau called "tactics" he shows how people without power must creatively use the spaces controlled by the powerful for their own needs. The powerful and conventional world designs a simple, functional space for disposing of bodily waste. However, Rao's queer characters cleverly reclaim this space, transforming it into a venue for enhancing pleasure and fostering queer social interactions. This area evolves into a kind of parliament for forbidden desires, governed by a strict yet unspoken code of conduct. The novel's extremely direct and graphic descriptions of events that unfold here are not merely pornography for its own sake. Instead, they serve as an anthropological record of a hidden world, deliberately aiming to illuminate the unseen heartbeat of this secret community.

Moving forward the project remaps the city's transport systems. Bombay being popular for its busy life, best depicted through the local train is represented as a perfect cruising point for queer people. The jostling of bodies during rush hour transforms from a bore, annoying day into a vibrant flirtatious exchange. An intimate brush, a lingering touch, a gaze held just few more seconds, become a valuable medium for erotic hints. This clever exchange transforms the dull moments to thrilling opportunities for unexpected attraction. The next spot is the iconic "Queen's Necklace" of Bombay, Marine Drive. The dark nighttime, the winding promenade, filled with parked cars and shadowy queer spots, transforms into a vast open space for sexual encounters. Rao exposes a more genuine and unrefined sexual energy that lies beneath the idealized images of these iconic spots. By specifically naming locations like Cuffe Parade and Bhindi Bazaar, he fixes drop points for queer existence. Incorporating these real places into his narrative



Rao asserts queer identity within the city, claiming a space for a concealed sense of belonging.

III. The Tangled Knot of Caste, Money, and Sex: A Bold Look at Relationships

In 'The Boyfriend' Rao deploys a very firm political move by refusing to demonstrate Yudi and Milind's relationship as pure, spiritual love. Rather he centres their transactional bond that sprouts the harsh and complicated terms between caste, class, and sexuality. Here exploitation is not disguised as romance but, it is a candid portrayal of how desire is regulated by social power within a society rooted in deep inequalities. Yudi comes from a well-off, upper-caste Hindu background with a stable job and cultural sophistication. In contrast, Milind is an attractive young Dalit man from the chawls who faces economic and social instability. Their relationship is purely based on a clear exchange, mirroring the concept of "traffic in women" popularized by Gayle Rubin, reinterpreted in the context of a queer, caste-based economy. Milind's physical appeal and sexual availability serve as his primary assets in a society where his caste and class typically render him invisible, treated merely as a source of cheap labour or social scorn. Yudi provides him more than just financial support; he opens the door to a different lifestyle—fine dine, gifts, and access to a wealthier, still marginalized, gay community. The novel suggests that their affection is not less than a form of love, but emerged out of this transactional nature. Because of their negotiation of unequal resources, this relationship can be viewed as a complex ethical endeavour.

Rao's novel has faced criticism for presenting a seemingly cynical perspective that revolves around raw desire and selfishness. The narrator, Yudi, is portrayed as a thoughtless, privileged gay man who has flaws and is often self-centered. Dismissing the novel as politically incorrect, however, overlooks its more profound challenge. Rao challenges the comfortable liberal fantasy of an easy, equal relationship that can transcend centuries of structured violence. Instead, he compels readers to confront the uncomfortable reality of transactional nature of desire, particularly across significant power imbalances tangled in these systems. Milind's eventual marriage to a woman is not merely an act of betrayal that devastates Yudi emotionally. Rather an inevitable consequence of societal pressure stemming from heterosexuality and the caste-patriarchal compulsion. In many ways, Milind's sexuality becomes a resource for his survival and advancement. His relationship with Yudi provides financial relief, while marrying a woman from his own community endures social respectability. The true tragedy lies not in the dissolution of the relationship, but in the realization that it was always fated to be shattered by the immense social forces that Rao so meticulously portrays in his work.



IV. Over-the-Top Humour, Body Horror, and an Anti-Style of Rebellion

The novel is the OTT version of the film made by Bollywood for its rule breaking style and content that exhibits camp sensibility with a raw focus on deeply rooted politics. This text seeks not to be accepted or pitied; rather, it aims to provoke and repel, liberating the queer narrative from the confines of being “respectable.”

Rao employs Yudi as his own sharp narrative voice by mocking at the institutions of straight society like marriage. He does not describe marriage as a sacred, holy bond but as a hypocritical, grotesque system. The married men who visit the Churchgate toilet aren't so much hidden or repressed. Instead, they are individuals who have become part of a system where homosexual behaviour is regarded as normal rather than a fundamental crisis of identity. The marriage of Gauri, Yudi's lesbian friend to a gay man is portrayed as both a joke but sensible arrangement of survival. This campy subversion forms one of the novel's most ridiculous subplots: an idea where Yudi would marry a straight female TV actress, have a child with her, and then raise the child with Milind. The outrageousness of this idea, reminiscent of a chaotic Bollywood fantasy, serves the OTT purpose. It jokes at the absurd demand that society place on queer individuals, while also wildly proposing a rebellious, though impractical, vision of an alternative family structure.

The novel takes a troubling but compelling approach to the grotesque. Rao emphasizes the harsh realities of the body--its smells, excretions, fluids, and sweat. A significant plot point revolves around Milind contracting a sexually transmitted infection due to a specific act, with the subsequent medical treatment detailed explicitly. In a literary landscape where queer desire is frequently portrayed as something spiritual or beautiful, Rao's focus on the body's less savoury aspects represent a strong statement. It outrightly rejects the notions of cleanliness and purity that are often prerequisites for granting a marginalized group civil rights and societal acceptance. This notion connects to Julia Kristeva's theory of the “abject.” By confronting bodily fluids head-on, the narrative dismantles the clean, proper boundaries that society relies upon. He unapologetically represents queer sex as messy, risky, and at times darkly humorous rather than idealized romance. Rao challenges the homophobic ideas that equate same-sex attraction with illness and moral decay. Instead, he embraces the diseased, the unkempt, and the marginalized as a space for radical and unapologetic authenticity.

V. Conclusion

Though Rao's novel 'The Boyfriend' does not have happy ending or any moral lesson, nor a hopeful story still, we cannot consider it as a hopeless one. It has a rebellious hope that lies in the very own literary world recorded in a form of secret life that exists in between the city of dreams.



Rao gave us a masterpiece of raw unpolished archive of queer life amidst the time before dating apps and legal end of India's sodomy law, hence engraving a specific historical moment. He preserves history by mapping up sexual meeting spots in the urban space, which otherwise looks very ordinary city of chaos. He combines this urban space with social power through his characters and use of unashamed language, less polite to depict queer life dipped in Indian politics. He advocates for a place in the city- not clean, safe or private but the right to be messily carried out in its own shocking way of exchange. The novel recorded over the city offers a rough design for an unruly, unashamed and deeply imperfect way of queer life together.

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