

Compulsory Heterosexuality and India's Gay Subculture in R. Raj Rao's Select Works

Shiksha Bala and Tanu Gupta

Abstract

Throughout his works, R. Raj Rao discusses the LGBTQ+ community's endeavours to address the reputation of queer individuals as sexual deviants in response to the continued implementation of Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code. He emphasises the nuances of the queer subculture in India, emphasising how queer identities have been persistently questioned, ridiculed, and afflicted before its legal acknowledgment on September 6, 2018. Compulsory heterosexuality fosters the creation of an institutionalized form of human sexuality. Rao's work emphasises the institutionalisation of heteronormative sexuality and its repercussions on queer identities. This article imparts a critical analysis of the idea of 'compulsory heterosexuality' in the Indian gay subculture represented by Rao in his works. It works to dismantle how the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality propagates the seeds of violence in the lives of queer people. As a qualitative research method, textual analysis concerning particular theoretical perspectives would be used.

Keywords: Compulsory Heterosexuality, Homophobia, Homosexuality, Gay, Normative Heterosexuality.

Introduction

The prevalent notion that heterosexuality is the sole 'natural' sexual orientation frequently obscures the prevalence of gender nonconformity throughout history. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, lesbian feminists and

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gay liberationists pioneered the notion of compulsory heterosexuality.¹ In her seminal lesbian feminist work, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980), Adrienne Rich explains it as a term that criticises the very notion of heterosexuality as the default state of sexuality by exposing it as a social construct. She postulates that heterosexuality is commonly represented as a natural, inborn, and freely chosen form of sexuality. This results in a social and cultural framework where everyone is assumed heterosexual, and gender disparity is accepted as the norm. Compulsory heterosexuality is encouraged by gender stereotypes, or perceptions of what constitutes an adequate masculine or feminine aspect. In his writing, R. Raj Rao offers an unconventional approach to queer sexuality, asserting that gender non-conforming subculture is subversive enough to invalidate the legitimacy of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. This present study intends to unravel the association between compulsory heterosexuality and the gay subculture represented by R. Raj Rao's works. It will examine how the former leads to the inequity of the latter.

Methodology

The methodology of the proposed article is based on a comprehensive analysis of primary sources in accordance with the academic queer approach's distinctive theoretical premises. A queer approach will be used to contest the conventional social structuring of genders and social identities along the heteronormative binary, as well the privilege ascribed to heterosexuality as 'normal' compared to homosexuality as its deviant and abominable 'other.' Adrienne Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' will be identified as an analytical frame for investigating the select works. The relationship between compulsory heterosexuality and the gay subculture will be investigated. Further, the relationship between sexuality and power ideologies as they are inscribed in the texts will be examined through the lens of a few Michel Foucault's essays. Queer theory will be used to investigate the fundamental essentialist-constructivist

Shiksha Bala completed her Master's degree at Jammu University and has qualified NET. She is currently a full time Research Scholar in Chandigarh University. Her research focuses on Queer Studies in India. Tanu Gupta is a Professor and HOD of English in University Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities at Chandigarh University. She received her PhD from Punjabi University, Patiala. Her research interests include Gender, Psychoanalytic and Postcolonial Studies. She is the author of more than 80 research articles and seven books.

¹ Steven Seidman, 'Critique of Compulsory Heterosexuality', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, vol. 6, no. 18 (2009), pp. 18-28.

struggle in identity politics and contribute to reinterpreting sexuality on the grounds of fluidity, uncertainty, and plurality.

Gender Construction due to Compulsory Heterosexuality

The existence of a structural relationship between compulsory heterosexuality and a gender binary hierarchy is empirically true. Compulsory heterosexuality is inexplicable without a dichotomous gender order, and gender binarism seems to disintegrate in the absence of compulsory heterosexuality. Several assumptions are brought into question, including how compulsory heterosexuality generates gender, the legitimacy of the gender binary, and the social structure's total power over personal liberty. Lesbian liberationists and feminists believe that a social system based on compulsory heterosexuality fosters the development of two distinct, antagonistic, and hierarchical genders. These proponents of compulsory heterosexuality hold a substantial and disputed interpretation of gender constructivism. In circumstances of enforced heterosexuality, gender control is regarded to surpass social ideologies and social spaces, culminating in a dualistic gender social hierarchy. Gendered categorisation is likewise considered to transcend significantly into people's internal affairs, with their psyches, aspirations, and illusions constituting primary variables influencing human endeavours. As a result, gender could be said to precede the individual constantly. Beneath the shackles of compulsory heterosexuality, the individual never transcends gender. As Steven Seidman, in *Critique of Compulsory Heterosexuality* (2009) argues:

Men are men whether at home, during sex, in therapy, at work, or in politics. In short, critics of compulsory heterosexuality theorize a gender order reproduced by psychic and social structures that act with the force of the unconscious — that is, beyond deliberation and intention. This condition of gender structuralism is intended to expose the power of compulsory heterosexuality, thus revealing the agentic-like power of social structure against a culture legitimated by the celebration of individual agency.²

In 'Sowing the Seeds of Violence in Heterosexual Relationships: Early Adolescents Narrate Compulsory Heterosexuality', Deborah L. Tolman et al conducted research and brought out the responses of the early adolescents. They found constant pressure on adolescents to date and engage in a heterosexual way to establish their heterosexual status. There is constant peer pressure to develop their masculinity and police each other. Many explained

² Seidman, 'Critique of Compulsory Heterosexuality', pp. 21-22.

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that they gave into this pressure “So people don't think you're gay.”³

Paradoxically, some adolescents acknowledged participating in such sexual assertiveness despite the lack of their own sexual impulses. One of the adolescents responded about the peer pressure as:

It was like people around me like oh, you should do that, you should do this, kiss and stuff, like in front of everybody. You know there'll be a group. It's just like sometimes you've got to like to kiss her or whatever.⁴

All of this provides them with a 'choice that is not a choice.' While reflecting on the Indian situation, the present study supports Deborah L. Tolman et al.'s perception. Rao marvellously addresses this societal pressure issue in his 2010 novel *Hostel Room 131*, wherein he mocks social institutions that propagate authoritarian ideologies under the garb of a polished demeanour. *Hostel Room 131* is a love story of two young men, Siddharth and Sudhir, in an engineering college. The narrative is a way to understand the compulsory heterosexuality issues facing young gay men in present-day India. Rao has Sudhir undergo a sex change operation, a physical transformation. She thus becomes Sumati to live together as a same-sex couple in India. Sudhir tells Siddharth that “I will become a woman . . . so that we can get married . . . two men cannot get married, but a man and a woman can.”⁵

Rich perceived heterosexuality as a globally prevalent structure that organizes male and female relationships, rather than an individual matter of being attracted to and engaging in sexual conduct with the opposite sex. This heterosexual institution is dreamed up of unstructured but explicitly stated and obligatory norms through which males and females embark on romantic relationships. For Siddharth and Sudhir, heterosexuality is not really a choice; instead, it is something they must follow due to enormous normative pressures to classify as heterosexual. Raewyn Connell proposed the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' in his work *Masculinities, Power, and Alliance Politics*. He exhibits hegemonic masculinity as a distinctly gendered construct. This hegemonic masculine identification promotes the notion of a distinct sort of masculinity that heterosexuality must recognize. Rao highlights how these ideologies operate against society's ability to create

³ Deborah L. Tolman, Renée Spencer, Myra Rosen-Reynoso and Michelle V. Porsche, 'Sowing the Seeds of Violence in Heterosexual Relationships: Early Adolescents Narrate Compulsory Heterosexuality', *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2003), p. 167.

⁴ Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso and Porsche, 'Sowing the Seeds of Violence in Heterosexual Relationships', p. 167.

⁵ R. Raj Rao, *Hostel Room 131* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 200.

an alternative masculine identity. As Sudhir bemoans:

If I'm a man and am caught having sex with another man, people will call me chhakka or a homo-both words of abuse. Why should I allow people to abuse me? But if I'm a woman, they'll accept my relationship with man. Because it's a relationship that society understands. So, in a way, I'm doing it not just for myself but also for society.⁶

Sudhir is obligated to undergo surgery to change his biological sex to acquire a so-called normal and socially acceptable 'legitimate body'.⁷

In *The History of Sexuality*, as Foucault contends, homosexual bodies are deemed 'unnatural'. As a consequence, the body will always be subject to sexual politics and dominance. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault explains how the "body is also directly involved in a political field."⁸ As a result, the body becomes inextricably linked to disciplinary procedures. The novel argues that the homosexual body is perpetually affected by discourses centred on a binary concept of sexuality. Foucault emphasised sexuality as positioned within power structures and discourses. He contended that certain forms of sexuality were portrayed as unnatural and evil and that their adherents were subjected to surveillance. He relied on the sexualised and sexual body as a site of power play. Various forces, such as law or medicine, mapped and labelled the body in a particular manner before 'acting' on it. Foucault shifted sexuality from the realm of the pure body to discourses and culture. According to him, society constructs itself as normal and safe by denouncing some people as 'deviant' and criminal. The labelled category is a form of 'social control' emphasizing that some people are naturally deviant.

The idea of 'Biopolitics' is vital to understanding how power is exercised over personal lives. Foucault explains in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France* that political and biological dynamics cohabit to determine life processes. Rao's poem *National Anthem* strongly validates Foucauldian perception. "The cops said we were homosexuals and anti-nationals and deserved to be of being sent to the land of the pure."⁹

⁶ Rao, *Hostel Room 131*, p. 204.

⁷ It should, of course, be noted that *Hostel Room 131* significantly glosses over the experiences of transgender women in India, with gender transition depicted as a measure to overcome compulsory heterosexuality rather than a lived experience of gender dysphoria.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 25.

⁹ R. Raj Rao, *Anthem and Other Poems* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2019).

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Sandeep Bakshi makes precisely this point; he proposes that the postcolonial nation maintains the colonialist project of 'policing' minoritized sexualities.¹⁰ Power controls what is viewed as natural and what is viewed as unnatural. When Yudi and Milind in the novel *The Boyfriend* develop warts on their bodies and went to the doctor, they are warned against unnatural sex:

The doctor to whom Yudi and Milind jointly went for treatment was disgusted. How could the two men be so shameless as to openly admit they had contracted the warts through anal intercourse? 'No unnatural sex, no warts' he keeps telling them as he injected them, assuming the manner of a high school master.¹¹

Section 377 of IPC considered homosexuality as an unnatural offense. The whole law was created based on a societal perception of what is natural. The section was worded thus:

Section 377: Unnatural offences – Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall be liable to fine.

Explanation – Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.¹²

According to Seidman, compulsory heterosexuality additionally produces disparities and hierarchies amongst heterosexuals. Compulsory heterosexuality, for instance, sustains a standard of so-called natural heterosexuality by enforcing not only heterosexuality's normative standing but also a normative power inside heterosexuality. "If homosexuals are imagined as body- and pleasure-centered, nonmonogamous, and predatory, so-called normal heterosexuality will be associated with person centeredness, monogamy, and the binding of sex to intimacy and love."¹³ Homosexual love will be depicted as unsteady and transient compared to heterosexual love, which is viewed as stable and robust because of its social commitments. Thus, within the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality, not just homosexuality is discarded; heterosexual acts that deviate from

¹⁰ Sandeep Bakshi, 'Fractured Resistance: Queer Negotiations of the Postcolonial in R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*,' *South Asian Review*, vol. 32, issue 2 (2012), pp. 37-55.

¹¹ R. Raj Rao, *The Boyfriend* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 152.

¹² 'India Code: Section Details, Section 377: Unnatural offences', *India Code*. At https://www.indiacode.nic.in/show-data?actid=AC_CEN_5_23_00037_186045_1523266765688&orderno=434. Accessed 3/03/2022.

¹³ Seidman, 'Critique of Compulsory Heterosexuality', p. 24.

approved norms of heterosexuality are similarly maligned. Based on the premise of compulsory heterosexuality, certain heterosexuals (for example, sex workers, libertines, or pornographers) come to occupy a similar space as homosexuals, and indeed, many occupy both categories. Thus, the concept of compulsory heterosexuality implies hierarchies and divisions amongst homosexuals and heterosexuals. As a consequence of these hierarchies, sexual politics transcend gender choice politics, eliciting debate over the intention of sexuality (procreation, love, pleasure,), intimate attitudes and structure rules (marriage, cohabitation, monogamy), sexual gender rules, and rules restricting sex and the personal, public spheroid. Each of these disagreements has its own hierarchy and division and its very own set of regulatory and impediment measures. Furthermore, it is not self-evident that sexual politics should be confined to gender choice politics.¹⁴ Framing sexual politics as a repudiation of compulsory heterosexuality and maintaining that the (hetero)sexuality/(homo)sexuality dichotomy, is the major dimension of sexual oppression.

Transgressing Compulsory Heterosexuality

Heterosexuality, according to Rich, is imposed and maintained by coercion rather than voluntarily chosen. She concisely put it, “Heterosexuality... has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force.”¹⁵ Homosexuality and gender binarism are enforced by societal institutions, laws, policies, cultural representations, and regular acts of harassment, intimidation, and violence. It is implemented in the very same manner that wage labour is enforced under capitalism. According to Marx, a legally free labourer has no choice except to give up their labour-power in exchange for remuneration. Similarly, the social arrangement of retribution and surveillance is activated in the context of compulsory heterosexuality to impose a social order based on male dominance, gender binary, and heterosexuality.¹⁶ People who defy rigorous gender conventions are often deemed sexually deviant by others; gender norm violations become an

¹⁴ Gayle Rubin, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’, in *Culture, Society and Sexuality*, eds Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (London: Routledge, 1984); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (Trumansburg: Antelope Publications, 1982), pp. 238–239.

¹⁶ Charlotte Bunch, *Lesbianism and the Women’s Movement* (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975); Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*.

imprecise indicator of another's sexual orientation or identity. It is unfathomably compelling to explore gay subculture via the lens of 'alterity'. One can consider referring to Sigmund Freud's notion of the repressed's return—the repressed's inalterability. Freud states in *The Dissection of the Psychological Personality* of his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* that "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."¹⁷ The repressed sexual urge manifests as a rebellious attitude against practices that endeavour to repress gay identity in Rao's work. The depiction of blatant sensuality acquires relevance by delivering a message of dissent. Rao eloquently conveys the uproar of an independent spirit in the prologue to *National Anthem and Other Poems* (2019), "I'm a terrorist of the spirit/ I know not how to hold a gun/ But know how to wield the pen."¹⁸ He has been vociferous in his denunciation of the societal, political, and institutional structures that, in the guise of the law, foster homophobia. His ideologies are premised on, as Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit Dasgupta point out, "an oppositional reading tactic that relentlessly subverts and dismantles any form of normative interpretation."¹⁹ As Bakshi and Dasgupta argue in *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis*, questioning constitutes a critical ability and is crucial to Queer cultures's mechanisms. In the poem *Outlaw* (2019), the narrator chooses to declare himself an 'outlaw', a position that grants him authority in the midst of the law's heinous oppression: "What are you then? / You are an ostracised outlaw."²⁰ The adamant and untamed artistic flare is seen as a symbol of the queer subculture's intrinsic radicalism, in which people may not topple the system but persistently challenge it through their own distinctive means and actions.

The plot of the novel *The Boyfriend* (2003) depicts Yudi as a forty-something, self-identified gay man who is staunchly middle-class and atheist, traits that are perceived as complementing his profession as a journalist. He enjoys a hedonistic lifestyle and occasionally has intercourse in public places, availing the opportunity of the male homosocial spaces that

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (London: Norton, 1977), p. 74.

¹⁸ Rao, *Anthem and Other Poems*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit Dasgupta, *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis* (India: Orient BlackSwan, 2019), p. 106.

²⁰ Rao, *Anthem and Other Poems*, p. 7.

existed in Bombay in the 1990s. He falls in love with Milind, a much younger untouchable man with whom he has a sporadic and deceptive relationship. Milind's parents ultimately marry him to a woman of his same caste, and he isolates himself from Yudi. Milind returns to Yudi, impoverished in his new marriage, to re-establish their relationship, unafraid to seek his "pocket money" towards the novel's end.²¹ As a result, the novel is a sarcastic expose of the power conflicts that arise in India due to the imbrications of gay or homosexual identity and other longer-standing identifications. Compulsory heterosexuality is reinforced by gender norms, which we regard as adequately masculine or feminine. To legitimise enforced heterosexuality, severe contrasts between femininity and masculinity, such as the difference between a feminine and masculine-sounding voice, are invoked. People who defy conventional gender norms, such as males with delicate vocals or female construction laborers, are usually considered sexually aberrant by others; gender norm transgression constitutes an inaccurate indicator of another's sexual orientation.

Crocodile Tears presents a narrative that is an unapologetic portrayal of an intimate relationship between a publishing company house editor and Ashutosh, one of his subordinates. Compulsory heterosexuality leads to homophobia and forces a homosexual individual to remain in the closet, leading to a dual existence as in case of Ashutosh. He feels very sacred by exposing his hidden sexual identity. "He once told me that if anyone got a whiff of our romance, he would leave the town and return to his native place in the Sahyadri hills of Maharashtra, for he would never be able to face the world again."²² Ashutosh hurriedly hides in the bogs when the narrator's friend Richard makes a sudden appearance:

Before turning to go, he cocked his head to catch a glimpse of my lover beyond the front door. An impossibility, for street-smart Ashutosh had by then hidden himself in the bogs and refused to come out even after I assured him that the coast was clear.²³

On the other hand, the narrator also ensures that people gain as little insight into their private lives as possible:

It took much cajoling to get Ashutosh out of the washroom that morning. Taking him to bed after that was still tougher. All through, he'd thought of my apartment as the one place where there was cent

²¹ Rao, *The Boyfriend*, p. 203.

²² R. Raj Rao, *Crocodile Tears: New & Selected Stories* (Maharashtra: Vishwakarma Publications, 2018), p. 10.

²³ Rao, *Crocodile Tears: New & Selected Stories*, p. 10.

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per cent privacy. Neighbours did not knock on my door, as they tapped on each other's without warning. I did not hire the services of a cleaning woman or milkman or newsboy who could disturb us by showing up when they were least wanted. But Richard's sudden visit destroyed the illusion that my flat was a safe haven. Ashutosh was that way inclined all right, but on the unspoken condition that only we knew what we did when we were alone.²⁴

Internalisation of heteronormative sexual scripts is another mechanism to perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality. Scripting theory is employed by symbolic interactionists to explain how people use a series of behaviours or scripts in daily interactions with others. Social variables determine how these scripts are acquired and formed. Sexual scripts are actions that are specifically designed for sexual interactions. In the novel *Hostel Room 131*, when Sudhir fails to 'fit in' to those scripts, his parents take him to conversion therapy to a religious Baba. Baba claimed to change the gender identity of a homosexual person and fit him into a cisgender category in a month:

The baba ordered Sudhir to take off his shirt and lie down. A metal plate was placed on his chest. Fixed to the plate was a cream-coloured cord, at the other end of which was a 15-watt three-pin plug. The cold metal sent a shiver down Sudhir's spine. Without warning, the baba put the plug into a socket and switched on the button. A 440-volt current passed through Sudhir's body.²⁵

Despite the fact that homosexuality was abolished as a medically diagnosed mental disease by the American Psychiatric Association more than four decades ago, numerous mental health professionals, clergymen, and religious groups continue to use 'conversion' or 'reparative' therapy to alter sexual orientation.²⁶ Parents who believe their child's sexual identity can be transformed from lesbian, gay, or bisexual to the 'baseline' heterosexual may exclude their child from family activities or use religion to discourage, reject, or diminish their sexual orientation.²⁷ Such parental behaviours are frequently motivated by worry, and they constitute an

²⁴ Rao, *Crocodile Tears: New & Selected Stories*, p. 10.

²⁵ Rao, *Hostel Room 131*, pp. 145-146.

²⁶ 'Report of the American Psychological Association Task force on appropriate therapeutic responses to sexual orientation', *American Psychological Association*. At <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf>. Accessed 31/03/2022.

²⁷ Caitlin Ryan, David Huebner, Rafael M. Diaz, and Jorge Sanchez, 'Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults', *Pediatrics*, vol. 123, no. 1 (2009).

attempt to help their child ‘fit in’, be accepted by others, conform to religious values and views, and meet parental.²⁸ There is no proof to verify the supposed ‘efficiency’ of SOCE’s (sexual orientation change efforts) in altering sexual orientation. These techniques, on the other hand, have the ability to inflict considerable psychological damage. Patients experienced severe long-term damage, which included symptoms like depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, internalized homophobia. Apart from estrangement, isolation, social alienation, disruption of intimate relationships, and loss of social support, individuals described severe social and interpersonal harm. SOCE may aggravate suicidal behaviour. According to Ryan et al, suicide has been the second most significant cause of mortality among young adults aged 15 to 24 since 2011, and LGBTQ+ young persons are more than twice as likely as their heterosexual counterparts to report a history of suicide attempts. Moreover, gay adults are three to five times as prone than heterosexual adults to attempt suicide. Young LGBTQ+ persons who are more prone to be rejected by their parents and caretakers are 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide.²⁹

Sudhir is transformed following this shock treatment. He refuses to acknowledge his companions and Siddharth, “after the visit to the Baba, he was no longer the same . . . all his friend found he has changed.”³⁰ He even assaults Siddharth with a rusty blade when he attempts to speak with him. Siddharth says, “Before I know it, the blade slashes my skin. He (Sudhir) keeps his words and assaulted me with it . . . the blood comes to the cuts quickly.”³¹ Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai discuss how homonormative constraints have turned sexuality to a ‘life and death’ matter in *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*.

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

²⁸ Susan L. Morrow and A. Lee Beckstead, ‘Conversion Therapies for Same-Sex Attracted Clients in Religious Conflict: Context, Predisposing Factors, Experiences, and Implications for Therapy’, *The Counseling Psychologist*, vol. 32, no. 5 (2004).

²⁹ Caitlin Ryan, Russell B. Toomey, Raphael M. Diaz, and Stephen T. Russell, ‘Parent-Initiated Sexual Orientation Change Efforts with LGBT Adolescents: Implications for Young Adult Mental Health and Adjustment’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2018).

³⁰ Rao, *Hostel Room 131*, p. 175.

³¹ Rao, *Hostel Room 131*, p. 177.

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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.³²

Compulsory heterosexuality frequently results in internalised homophobia. In *The Boyfriend*, Milind is portrayed as a victim of internalized homophobia by Rao. Milind is unsure of his sexual preferences from the start of the novel. He is not as radical in his thinking and attitude as Yudi is. He is perpetually hesitant to identify as gay. Throughout the novel, his sexual identity remains heteronormative; he always takes the ‘active’ role in bed and believes that this does not qualify him as a member of the homosexual community. He is adamant about not being referred to as a “Chhakka”, a homosexual.³³ He blames Yudi for his sexual promiscuity upon his return from the A. K. Modeling Agency:

You are the one who has ruined my life. It's because of you that I became a homo. Had it not been for you and your perverse ways, I would never have landed up at a place like A. K Modeling Agency and become a prostitute. Shame on you! I wonder whether I'll now be able to lead a normal married life.³⁴

Claustrophobic Indian Cities

A city is a venue where the hegemonic class or the ruling class exercises its power through various mechanisms. Ideological state apparatuses are numerous means of propagating the heteronormativity discourse. Throughout *Boyfriend*, Bombay is portrayed as a space where sexual norms are violated. Yudi's apartment, the gay bar, the modelling agency, and the restroom, among others, are escape routes. These queer spaces are transitional zones that provide an alternative to the disciplines and routines of contemporary city life. The city exemplifies rationality and heteronormativity, whereas liminal spaces celebrate human sexuality in play. The city is transformed into a metaphor for concealed gay men. The majority of people are unaware of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender spaces. Though the city provides anonymity, Milind and Yudi are constantly monitored. Male homophobia, the irrational fear or intolerance of gay men, is depicted in the novel as a dynamic that serves to keep men

³² Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 2001), p. xxiv.

³³ A derogatory Indian word for homosexual people.

³⁴ Rao, *The Boyfriend*, p. 210.

within the boundaries of traditionally defined roles. Bombay becomes a site of contradictions—it creates queer spaces while also politicizing sexuality. The novel depicts the chaotic and unseen side of Mumbai’s gay subculture. At the novel’s outset, Rao describes the city’s public gents’ toilets as the site of homoerotic desires. He describes the Churchgate toilet as follows:

The Churchgate loo has two sections. By convention one of them is the gay wing, the other the other the straight. The hetero wing of course has a better supply of mainstream men, but one dare not cruise in that area for fear of being bashed up.³⁵

Rao further describes the loo as a supplier of men for twenty-four hours and the site of secret homosexual activities in the city. “The gents’ toilet at Churchgate provided a twenty-four-hour supply of men; the amount of semen that went down the urine bowls was enough to start a sperm bank.”³⁶ It’s harder to envision such locations as sites of homosexual activity for those who have spaces to satisfy their desires in mainstream society. Rao’s creation of a queer space for his gay subject in the filthy confines of a public toilet reflects the queer political agenda to carve out a buffer zone for the sexual minorities in India. The toilet spaces embody a mainstream to gay subculture’s homophobic ideology. Toilets are the city’s only safe space for sexual minorities:

The stinking places were always humming with erotic activity. Orgies in the dark, amidst piss and shit. The foul smell, somehow, made sex more enjoyable. Having spent so much of his life in these loos Yudi has come to the conclusion that there was indeed something sexual about filth.³⁷

Sriya Das, in “Gay Subculture and the Cities in India: A Critical Reading of Select Works of R Raj Rao,” notes that the concept of solitude and isolation that the city provides to its residents is one of the city’s primary challenges. Johnston and Longhurst, in their book *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities* (2010), point out that “cities have frequently been regarded as spaces of social and sexual liberation due to a perception that they offer anonymity and an escape from the familiar community relations of small towns and villages.”³⁸ Das puts forward that:

The novel titled *Hostel Room 131* (2010) deals with the idea of

³⁵ Rao, *The Boyfriend*, p. 6.

³⁶ Rao, *The Boyfriend*, p. 2.

³⁷ Rao, *The Boyfriend*, p. 28.

³⁸ Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst, *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 80.

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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.³⁹

Rao describes, "When seized by the sexual urge he (Sudhir) frequented various public parks and loos in the city where men met."⁴⁰

Therefore, Rao's placing of same-sex activities in such spaces parodies the 'normal' sensibilities of the clean and unclean. Same-sex sexual activities are thereby presented as 'unclean'. Filthy places, therefore, are used by Rao as a narrative tool to critique societal phobia of the traditionally held views of a clean body and a clean mind. The toilet spaces used act as a harsh critique of society's homophobic ideology, created in a dominant patriarchal society propagating a heterosexual ideology for social control.

Conclusion

Rao is highly vocal about his struggles in India as a gay man. His works evoke a plethora of responses, articulating India's dominant discourses on urban (homo)sexuality. Rao takes an unconventional approach to gay sexuality, arguing that the gender-nonconforming subculture is sufficiently subversive to undermine the legitimacy of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. He argued that there is a culture of arranged marriages throughout the Indian mainstream. Boys and girls are not allowed to have any sexual relations before marriage. There are separate seats and queues for men and women in trains, buses, cinema halls, religious places etc.⁴¹ This is how compulsory heterosexuality leads to Gender production eventually. And those who do not fit under the category or who violate this binarism face discrimination and homophobia. As Rich argues that heterosexuality is inflicted and reinforced by coercion rather than freely chosen.

³⁹ Sriya Das, 'Gay Subculture and the Cities in India: A Critical Reading of Select Works of R. Raj Rao', *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 3 (October 2021), pp. 3-4.

⁴⁰ Rao, *Hostel Room 131*, p. 139.

⁴¹ R. Raj Rao and Dibyajyoti Sarma, *Whistling in the Dark: Twenty-One Queer Interviews* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008), p. xix.