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**TRANSGRESSIVE SEXUALITIES, QUEER SPACE AND HOMOPHOBIA IN *THE BOYFRIEND* BY R. RAJ RAO**

**KEY WORDS:** homosexuality, homophobia, queer space, transgressions, heteronormativity.

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**ABSTRACT**

Homosexuality is alien to the Indian culture and it is considered as a taboo, a kind of immoral act, deviation from the norm, though there are indications of the existence of lesbians and gays in ancient Indian literature, culture and architecture. Sigmund Freud is of the opinion that all men are born bisexuals which suggests that homosexuality is as natural and normal as heterosexuality. But due to the societal and ideological constructs, homosexuality is considered as abnormal, eccentric, unnatural sexual behaviour and people with homosexual desire are considered as transgressors of norm. Thus, these people face discriminations in the homophobic Indian society and are relegated to the margins of the society. They are not allowed to assimilate in the mainstream Indian culture and are forced to live in the closets and hence they have to lead a double life both as a heterosexual and a homosexual. Since homosexuality is considered as uncivilized and immoral, the mainstream Indian society does not give space to these people to lead a normal life. Everywhere they have to live under surveillance. Therefore, these people are always in search of their own spaces where there would be no surveillance to their lives.

The aim of this paper is to study the representation of the queer spaces in the Indian society and how these spaces try to destabilize the heteronormativity of the Indian society in R Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*. An attempt shall also be made to study the inherent homophobia of the society and whether the queer protagonists of the novel are able to free themselves from this homophobia of the society or they are also the victim of it.

Homosexuality is alien to the Indian culture and it is considered as a taboo, a kind of immoral act, deviation from the norm, though there are indications of the existence of lesbians and gays in ancient Indian literature, culture and architecture. Sigmund Freud is of the opinion that all men are born bisexuals which suggests that homosexuality is as natural and normal as heterosexuality. But due to the societal and ideological constructs, homosexuality is considered as abnormal, eccentric, unnatural sexual behaviour and people with homosexual desire are considered as transgressors of norm. Thus, these people face discriminations in the homophobic Indian society and are relegated to the margins of the society. They are not allowed to assimilate in the mainstream Indian culture and are forced to live in the closets and hence they have to lead a double life both as a heterosexual and a homosexual. Since homosexuality is considered as uncivilized and immoral, the mainstream Indian society does not give space to these people to lead a normal life. Everywhere they have to live under surveillance. Therefore, these people are always in search of their own spaces where there would be no surveillance to their lives.

R. Raj Rao's novel *The Boyfriend* (2003), one of the first gay novels come from India, deals with these issues of transgression, alternate spaces and homophobia in Indian society. The novel tries to deconstruct the notion of heteronormativity and to inscribe the queer subculture of Bombay as a legitimate part of the mainstream Indian culture. The novel negotiates the space for queer representation within the homophobic Indian society and thus tries to destabilize the construction of heteronormative ideology. But, Indian society consists of complex identity markers like class, caste, religion etc. and these factors also stand as impediments to same-sex love in India. Therefore, the queer resistances hit heteronormativity in a country like India emerge as a fractured resistance.

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interpreting of the primary text *The Boyfriend* (2003) by R. Raj Rao. The paper is also based on a significant number of secondary sources, i.e. the critical writings on the subject of gender and sexuality.

Set in the city of Bombay in early 1990s against the backdrop of the communal riots, the story of the novel revolves around the homosexual relationship between Yudi, a journalist in his forties and Milind, nineteen years old boy from the Dalit community. But Milind, in search of job and a desire to make more money, joins a modeling agency and disappears from Yudi's life. Disappointed, Yudi seeks the company of Gauri, his female friend who is in love with Yudi. However, Milind returns to his parents' home and agrees to marry a girl of his parents' choice since Milind never thinks himself as a gay and condemns Yudi for his immoral act of homosexual love. But, after marriage, Milind realizes the deteriorating financial condition of his family and at the advice of his wife, he decides to continue his relationship with Yudi. Thus, Milind's relationship with Yudi is entirely based on money. Thus, in India, same-sex relationships are based not only on love but other factors are also responsible for it.

The novelist uses the city of Bombay as the setting of the novel and the Hindu-Muslim communal riot as a symbolic backdrop of the same-sex love between Yudi and Milind. The background suggests the impossibility of same-sex love in homophobic Indian society like the impossibility of Hindu-Muslim union. In the novel, the novelist uses the city of Bombay as a space for queer negotiations and gives explicit details of the cruising spots in the city like the loos, local train compartments, gay night club, a modeling agency, the Azad Maidan, a gay newspaper etc. which are the 'invisible' queer spaces within the mainstream 'visible' spaces of everyday life. Moreover, most of the chapters in the novel are titled as "Testosterone", "Mate house", "A.K. Modeling Agency" etc which are the spaces where significant events take place. Through the protagonist Yudi, Rao explores these 'invisible' queer spaces within the city of Bombay.

In the beginning of the novel, the novelist gives explicit details of the public gents' toilets of the city as the site of homoerotic desires. The novel describes the Churchgate loo as the suppliers of men for twenty four hours and the site of secret homosexual activities in the city. It is told that the

The methodology of the paper is the close reading and

Churchgate loo has two parts by convention---one for the gays and the other for straights. Though the straights are more attractive than the gays yet the gays do not dare to enter into the area of the straights. Though there are not any indications which divide these two sections yet it becomes a convention and the loo attendants are well-aware of what is going on inside the loo. Yudi frequently visits the loo at the Churchgate Station in search of partners and picks up boys randomly for casual sex, especially the boys of working class background. It is in this loo where Yudi meets Milind who too visits the place frequently. It is indeed difficult to imagine such places as the site of homosexual activities but not having space in the mainstream society they have to choose such places to satisfy their desires. Like the loos, the Azad Maidan also functions in the same way to satisfy the erotic desires of gay men in Bombay but due to the Hindu-Muslim communal riots, the place is under the vigilance of police and they arrest the gay people loitering there after the sunset.

The local trains of Bombay are described as another queer space in the novel. The Bombay Suburban Railway ferries six million passengers back and forth daily from the suburbs to the city. The packed compartments is a kind of imprisonment where everyone is fixed in his own position but this imprisonment is pleasurable because of its erotic contact and because it is free from the surveillance of the heterosexual world. These local trains help Yudi to travel within the city of Bombay and to bridge the gap between his place of residence in Nalla Sopara and the urban spaces that satisfy his erotic quest. The main spots for cruising are the men's restrooms of the Mumbai railway station. Again, like the loos, some train compartments are reputed as gay compartments by convention which satisfies the homoerotic desires of some gays like Yudi.

Apart from the city streets, loos, local train compartments, Rao explores some other interior spaces within the city. Testosterone--- a gay nightclub in Bombay and A.K. Modeling Agency are the significant queer spaces in the novel. Testosterone is referred to as the only gay bar in Bombay where the gay population of Bombay gets the freedom to come together and when Milind muses over the amount of money the owner of the bar receives, he is surprised by the amount because each person has to pay rupees 100 and the city's gay population is greater than the population of Paris and London put together. This is indeed a very striking fact in a country like India where homosexuality is considered as a criminal offence prior to the abolition of the section 377.

The Testosterone also serves as a recruiting site for the A.K. Modeling Agency. Milind, Yudi's lover, becomes a recruit of this agency when one day he visits the gay nightclub alone. But the name and the description of this agency is divorced from reality. It is described as a 'gurukul' where good-looking young men are appointed as 'trainees' but nobody informs them what their duty is but everybody assumes that their job is to pose as a model as it is a modeling agency. But in reality, it is a business in male prostitution run by the famous Bollywood star Ajay Kapoor who himself is a bisexual. But he has to keep this in closet because his occupation as a film star does not allow him to openly embrace his sexual preferences. Therefore, in order to continue his double life, he runs the business of male prostitution in the guise of a modeling agency which actually offers good-looking young men to wealthy clients to satisfy their homoerotic desires. Again, the young men of the agency have to follow a strict routine---they have to rise up early in the morning and to begin their day with exercises. It is necessary for them to keep their body fit in order to attract wealthy clients. The agency maintains a record of the penis sizes of the recruits of the agency---S, M, XL, XXL---and rents them out to clients based on what they demand. In a way, the young men in the agency are treated as commodities in the guise of modeling to satisfy sexual needs

of some people who keep their sexual preferences in closets. Thus, the very attempt of the agency to misrepresent the reality shows the vulnerability of the queer space and the outside forces to destabilize its existence in a heterosexual society.

Along with these spaces, Rao talks about the literary spaces like the first and only gay magazine of India *Bombay Dost* where the homosexuals can advertise for the partners. This magazine is exclusively meant for the homosexuals and the heterosexuals are urged not to interfere in this private space of the homosexuals because heteros can meet each other in the society without any constraints and the mainstream Indian journals and magazines have matrimonial columns for them where they can advertise for marriage openly. But, such mainstream journals and magazines do not have any space for the homosexuals where they can write openly about their preferences regarding their partners. Therefore, they have their own magazine where the gay people from different parts of the country can express their views, share their experiences and choose partners freely. Though literature is meant for everyone, here also homosexuals are excluded and they have to find their own literary space. This shows the marginalization of the homosexual people in Indian society.

Apart from these public spaces, Yudi's apartment in Nalla Sopara, which he calls 'Mate house', is another instance of queer space in the novel. 'Mate House' is actually the name of the building that houses the apartment but Yudi adopts the name to refer to his own house where Milind comes to spend a week with him. With this move, the house becomes the private space for Yudi and Milind's relationship. In that house, both Yudi and Milind perform mock marriage rituals by lightening a fire and encircling it seven times, Milind as the groom and Yudi as the bride. After that, they continue to satisfy their homosexual desires in the 'Mate House' as 'a married couple'. But, like other public queer spaces, this private space is also not free from surveillance. Here, the surveillance comes in the form of Saraswati, the maid of Yudi. Though Yudi seems to be open regarding his identity as a gay, yet he also cannot come out of the closet regarding his relationship with Milind. That's why, Yudi sends Milind on a long walk before Saraswati's arrival to Yudi's apartment. Even on the next day, when Milind refuses to go anywhere, Yudi does not give Milind the recognition in front of Saraswati. Again he cannot speak freely with his mother regarding his sexual preference because of his mother's conservative outlook and his respect to his mother's feelings. Therefore, there is a wide gap between the mother and the son and here Yudi fails to come out of his closet although he claims himself to be a radical gay.

Similarly, Milind is also not free from the homophobia of the heteronormative society and has to abide by the norms of the society by marrying a girl of his family's choice. Right from the beginning, Milind is not sure about his sexual preferences. He is not radical in his attitude as a gay like Yudi. He always hesitates to think himself as a member of the gay community. After his return from the A.K. Modeling Agency, he condemns Yudi and blames him for his sexual promiscuity. But when Milind cannot run his family because of his poor financial condition, he again starts his relationship with Yudi and asks for money after sexual encounter with him. This proves that for Milind, money is more important than love to continue his homosexual relationship with Yudi. Thus in a country like India, where lower-class people are relegated to the margins and not allowed to live a prosperous life by offering respectable jobs, money is the most important factor than anything else.

Again, Yudi's friendship with Gauri after Milind's marriage with a girl is also questionable. Though he is a gay, Yudi feels better in Gauri's company. Yudi does not have any interest in her body but after Milind's marriage, he believes that

monogamy is a fallacy and realizes that different people satisfy different needs in one's life. This view makes Yudi accept Gauri's friendship and he starts spending his time with Gauri which has a therapeutic effect on Yudi to overcome his sorrows.

Therefore, though Yudi is the chief protagonist of the novel who represents the entire gay community of Bombay, yet his identity is not fixed, rather it is fluid and transient. To some extent, he is also suffering from the homophobia of the Indian society. Same is the case with Milind who belongs to the lower-class category which makes his situation more complicated than Yudi. Though Yudi and Milind try to resist heteronormativity by developing a homosexual relationship, yet in a country like India where caste, class, religion determine one's sexual preferences and create impediments to same-sex love, their resistance can be termed as fractured resistance.

Again, the queer spaces, functioning as the form of resistance to the mainstream culture and society, are full of contradictions. The city of Bombay, on the one hand, nurtures queer subcultures and on the other hand, acts as a place where homosexuality is destabilized by the law and other organizations. Thus, the nature of the city as a queer space can be termed as fluid and transient. Thus, though, for Yudi and Milind the city is a place of transgression, yet within the city, they are under surveillance. They can retain their queer identity by struggling to co-exist within the mainstream and the alternative spaces of the city of Bombay.

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