

# A Critical Study of Gay Subculture in India with reference to Select Works of R. Raja Rao

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## ABSTRACT

R. Raj Rao identifies the gay subculture in India as largely closeted and heavily stigmatized, shaped by caste, class, and societal norms. This subculture is characterized by hidden identities and cruising practices, particularly noted in Rao's novels *The Boyfriend* and *Hostel Room 131*. The characters in Rao's works, particularly Yudi and Milind from *The Boyfriend*, exhibit fluid identities influenced by societal pressures and personal experiences. For instance, Yudi embraces his gay identity, while Milind struggles with internalized homophobia, showcasing the duality present in many gay men's lives. Rao discusses internalized homophobia as leading many closeted gay individuals to deny their sexuality, influencing their relationships and self-worth. This psychological struggle is exemplified by Milind's character, who suppresses his identity to conform to societal expectations. Literature and media, including Rao's own works, have significantly contributed to the visibility and representation of gay subculture, encouraging more individuals to 'come out'. Films and web series like *Romil and Jugal* and *Baby Steps* illustrate changing perceptions and allow for open discussions about sexuality. The concept of shame in Indian culture pressures gay men to lead double lives, often marrying women to conform to societal norms. This not only impacts their own identities but also affects the women they marry, leading to mutual suffering in relationships. This prevails the trait of promiscuity as an authenticated prejudice and makes gay men fall into the gossamer of illusionary relationship of togetherness and belonging.

**Keywords:-** Subculture, Homophobia, Relationship & Promiscuity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every homosexual/gay man by default has two identities, the one that he knows or is confused about himself and the other that society knows of him or in a lot of cases it is how he wants to project himself to the society. In the case of Yudi, a lot of other characters in the novel knew about his sexual orientation and he was comfortable with it but Milind, though in a relationship with Yudi and having had several sexual adventures with him, projected himself as the macho straight man to the society. He lies about his name and gives a wrong address to Yudi when they depart after their first sexual activity. This represents the constant fear that gay men have about members of their own community. They cannot afford to give their real names and addresses as they are afraid of getting black mailed or being shamed by the other in future. This aspect makes them have another identity when they meet their partners at cruising places. Though Yudi gives his real name to Milind, he does not want Milind to know where he is taking him.

He also worries about being blackmailed by Milind or any of his sexual partners in future. There is a plethora of queer sexual identities already available in the country such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, Koti, Panti, hijra and so on. And though Mms reject the notion of identity based on sexual desire, they have, overtime, themselves come to constitute an identity and have added to the plethora of sexual identities present already.(Rao, *Criminal Love?*, 2017). So, Mms are an integral part of gay sub culture. But, when two men go beyond just having sex, there arises another question as to how two gay men identify themselves in their love relationship. However, the love relationship by default conveys the sexual relationship between them. The role of masculinity and femininity plays an important role here. A gay men pair involves the penetrator and the penetrate. In the novel *The Boyfriend*, though Yuda, older than Milind, allows Milind to penetrate him and Milind does not like to be penetrated. Yudi always offers his partners to play the active role in bed. This is with the idea that men who are allowed to penetrate do not really ask for money or blackmail others. It is only if they are penetrated that they feel "emasculated." "Whenever Yuda 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. If men were allowed to penetrate, there was no fear of their

returning afterwards to demand money or beat you up. Some even though it beneath their dignity to accept cash from someone they had buggered. For such a person, according to them, was 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 became wounded tigers. They felt emasculated. They could even murder." (Madhusudan.N,2019).

### **Gay Life in the City: Space, Power and Sexuality**

Sexuality and space is a field of study within human geography. The phrase encompasses all relationships and interactions between human sexuality, space and place, themes studied within cultural geography, i.e., environmental and architectural psychology, urban sociology, gender studies, queer studies, socio-legal studies, planning, housing studies and criminology. Specific topics which fall into this area are the geographies of LGBT residence, public sex environments, sites of queer resistance, global sexualities, sex tourism, the geographies of prostitution and adult entertainment, use of sexualised locations in the arts, and sexual citizenship. The field is now well represented within academic curricula at the university level, and is beginning to make its influence felt on secondary level education. Gay life in the city is a dynamic intersection of space, power, and sexuality, where cities offer both liberation and discipline through opportunities for anonymity and subcultural identity formation alongside potential social control and stigmatization. Power influences these dynamics by shaping how space is used, reinforcing norms, and regulating expressions of non-normative sexualities. This complex relationship leads to the emergence of gay enclaves, struggles for recognition, and ongoing negotiations of identity within the urban environment.

### **Urbanism and identity formation**

**The city as a site of escape:** Cities have historically offered anonymity and freedom for gay men and others who are stigmatized in more traditional or rural settings.

**The "gayborhood" phenomenon:** In the mid-to-late 20th century, LGBTQ+ people congregated in specific urban neighborhoods, creating visible communities with residential and commercial clusters. These spaces provided safety and community but have also faced criticism for potentially creating "gay ghettos" or being exclusionary to people of color, trans individuals, and those with less financial privilege.

**Contested spaces:** Urban areas are spaces of contestation where marginalized groups constantly negotiate their presence and rights against dominant social norms.

### **Power and spatial control**

**Heteronormativity and space:** Urban spaces are often designed and governed under the assumption of heterosexuality and a gender binary. This can result in policies and design choices that make it unsafe or uncomfortable for LGBTQ+ people to express themselves openly.

**Neoliberalism and commodification:** The rise of neoliberal economies has led to the commodification of queer identity. Cities often promote themselves as "gay-friendly" to attract tourists and capital, creating a "pink economy" that can gentrify neighborhoods and erase the radical history of LGBTQ+ activism. This selective tolerance means queer spaces are often "contingent," allowed to exist only as long as they serve the city's economic and cultural reputation.

**Queering the city:** Scholars have explored how urban design can be made more inclusive by challenging cis- and heteronormative assumptions. Queer urban design emphasizes creating spaces for spontaneous interaction and diverse sensory experiences rather than focusing solely on economic utility.

### **Sexuality and the built environment**

**Gender and sexuality in architecture:** Architectural theory has been used to explore the gendered and sexualized symbolism of urban structures and design elements.

**Non-commercial queer spaces:** LGBTQ+ life extends far beyond commercial gay bars and neighborhoods. Researchers explore how non-commercial spaces like community centers, homes, and even digital spaces are used to build community and resist mainstream pressures.

**Digital geographies:** The advent of online dating apps and other digital technologies has created new hybrid spaces for urban sexual encounters. These tools have changed the significance of traditional "gayborhoods" and how people find each other.

### Theory and critique

**Queer theory in geography:** Queer theory applies a post-structuralist lens to human geography, challenging the rigid classifications of sexual and gender identities. It complicates the idea of queer spaces, showing they are not always tangible or purely resistant, but can be exclusionary or participate in oppressive power dynamics.

**Intersectionality:** Critiques of early gay and lesbian geography point out its overemphasis on white, middle-class gay men and lack of attention to race, class, and gender differences. Subsequent scholarship has increasingly focused on the intersections of these identities, highlighting the diverse economic practices and spatial experiences of all LGBTQ+ people. This field of inquiry reveals that the urban landscape is not a neutral backdrop but is actively shaped by, and in turn shapes, the sexualities and gender identities of its inhabitants. It investigates how gay people navigate, resist, and redefine these powerful urban dynamics to create spaces for community, desire, and survival. (Source, Wikipedia).

### Gay Sexuality in R. Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend*

*The Boyfriend* is the story of Yudi Pandava—a prolific freelancer, who writes for newspapers and magazines like *The Hindu*, *Metropolis* and *Debonair*. He hooks up with all sorts of men from young boys to old seasoned fags, who attract him. In one such encounter he meets Milind Mahadik, a semi literate dalit boy who is half his age, in a public toilet at the Churchgate Railway Station. Milind hides his original name and proclaims himself as Kishore. Yudi meets him for several times and gradually the casual sex partner becomes his boy love. Meanwhile, Kishore is lost and Yudi's efforts to find his heartthrob go in vain. After a few months, Yudi luckily meets Kishore in a lift; this time he tells him his real name as Milind and then starts the obsessive affair of Yudi and Milind. Yudi being older and of upper middle class introduces the boy to the places brimming with feverish sexual activity like Café Volga, gay pub Testosterone and gay hangout places like Azad Maidan.

He gives the guy a peep into better life style different than him. Milind, on the other hand, acquaints Yudi with “shady Bombay, of which he knew next to nothing”. Both explore each other's Bombay, entering each other's territory and each looking a misfit. Yudi helps Milind find a job, teaches him the way of the world, only to find out that he is lost yet again. This time Yudi is madly in love with him and he is hurt even more badly. He visits his family living at Dagdi Chawl time and again to know about his whereabouts. Milind, on the other hand, secretly landed up in A.K. Modelling Agency located at Goregaon which served as a ‘gurukul’ owned by a leading Bollywood actor. The agency presented a wonderful “opportunity to lead a double life: to be a hetero by day and homo by night”. To go by its name “the boys modelled for products ranging from vests and briefs to contraceptives and cosmetics.

Their ads didn't appear on TV, or even in glossies like *Femina* and *Society*. They appear in the vernacular press on cheap parchment paper. . . . Modelling, however, was not the boys' only work . . . their real work [was] . . . as call boys”. Milind was having everything in agency, a good place to live, enough to eat and pocket money, what else he could desire for? But “No matter how many Esteems he rode in”, his self concept was shattered. Soon, Milind determines to leave the agency to return to his family and they decide to get him married to Leela thinking that responsibility will mend him. He also agrees readily so as to purge his guilt of being “a dhandewala, a whore”. Before starting his new life, he meets Yudi one last time to end up everything.

They decide to meet at Café Volga; there, much to Yudi's surprise Milind behaves egregiously. He abruptly leaves the place after “thrusting the wedding card into Yudi's hands”. Yudi becomes extremely upset on hearing the news but Milind callously leaves him alone, heartbroken and crying. Hereafter, Gauri, a painter whose marriage proposal Yudi had declined many times becomes the solace of his life. However Yudi keeps at bay Gauri's thoughts of their marriage. After a span of three years, Milind is shown as a lousy person who is not able to foot his family responsibility and hence returns to Yudi, of course not for love but for easy money. Before delving deep, it is appropriate to explicate briefly the underlying tone of the work. The novel is one of the first gay novels of India written by an openly gay writer R. Raja Rao, who is a professor of literature and a leading queer activist. The author unhesitatingly describes the gay underbelly of Bombay, its gay cruising places: in certain parts of certain toilets, certain bogeys of certain trains, certain areas of certain parks, which stop being mere public places to become the erotic sites. The places become forums for delirious homosexual activity where all kinds of men- rich, poor, beggars and thieves come to hustle with other men.

Some of these men are seasoned old fags, some bright eyed boys looking for ‘sugar daddies’ and many others are married men taking a quick pick up on their way home to their wives, to their other lives. Through the story, the author acquaints us with various features of gay life: issues of class, caste affecting gay identity, gay rape, police atrocities, AIDS epidemic, marginalization of women in gay subculture, binary oppositions between koti/ panthi, active/passive, fucker/fucked, bottoms up/down and gay/bisexual. The novel runs like a detailed commentary on aspects of gay magazines like *Bombay*

Dost to localized gay lingo, from eco- feminism to HIV campaigns, from cheap road side businesses to the business like that of AK Modelling Agency. (Neeru, 2017).

### **Psychological Entrapment and Queer Mobility**

In tropical India, the prevailing socio-economic disparities, socio-political tensions, and the nebulous boundaries between gender and sexuality collectively militate against the open embracing of queerness, rendering it a formidable challenge. Consequently, individuals are compelled to conceal their sexual identities, thereby precluding them from engaging in public displays of affection with their partners, in stark contrast to their heterosexual counterparts, leading to acts of queer mobility as a means of navigating these constraints. Raja Rao eloquently portrays this phenomenon, which offers a nuanced exploration of the intersections between queerness, identity, and societal expectations in the Indian context. Through his narrative, Rao masterfully excavates the complexities of queer experience, laying bare the ways in which systemic inequalities and normative binaries serve to marginalise and silence queer voices.

During the era of Section 377, individuals with same-sex desires faced profound shame and trepidation in disclosing their orientation, necessitating clandestine rendezvous in public lavatories and parks. This struggle of hiding in the closet is depicted in the inaugural scene of “Gentleman” unfolds with illicit encounters among men in a public lavatory, a space partitioned to preclude assaults by heterosexuals. The stereotype of homosexuals seeking solely sexual encounters has perpetuated past aggressions, persisting even after decriminalisation. Within the men’s washroom, factors like appearances, age, caste, or religion exerted minimal influence, but beyond, individuals from diverse backgrounds face marginalisation, relegated to ‘untouchable’ status within societal hierarchies. This dichotomy underscores the complex interplay between queer identity, spatiality, and social stratification in India.

The dearth of acknowledgment and acceptance after decriminalisation leads to stringent responses to suspected non-normative orientations, perpetuating a culture of clandestinity. Societal curiosity and taboos obscure understanding and foster repulsion, hindering Yudi’s comprehension of homosexuality, which is limited to mere carnality. In India, revulsion predominates when the LGBTQIA+ community seeks genuine expressions of identity, exemplifying the entrenched heteronormative paradigm. In the novel, a homosexual individual entering the Churchgate restroom would likely precipitate chaos, highlighting the tenuous boundaries between queer and normative spaces. (Radhakrishnan, 2024).

It is worth noting that both the partners insist on playing the part of a ‘man’ as in any heterosexual Hindu style of wedding. Although both the partners are gay, still the manliness cannot be compromised and dropped altogether to play a submissive feminine role. It is clear that masculinity presses both the men to play the part of an “engine” and whosoever plays the feminine role is effeminate and inferior. Yudi’s self-image gets shattered and annihilated. Other than this, the above episode also portrays the sad picture of gay world where gays either die of extreme isolation or develop some psychological disorder. The dire need of lifelong companionship, union and relationships in gay world has given birth to the current scenario of Pride Queer Marches/Out Parades to get recognition for same- sex marriage. If the same sex couples are given rights as the heterosexual couples, then it will not only result in acceptance of LGBT people but will also establish their marriage in its truest sense. Thus, the depiction of this aping of marriage is also a dig at compulsive heteronormativity.

The Churchgate has two sections. By convention one of them is the gay wing, 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. The gay wing gets nice guys only intermittently. As a college student, Yudi often felt like spending the whole day inside the loo to see what it yielded. But that was possible only in theory. There were loo attendants who knew what went on inside; some of them were on the payroll of the cops. They looked at people who hung around in the loo with a great deal of suspicion (Rao, 2016: 10).

Public lavatories facilitated clandestine homosexual encounters, enabling furtive meetings and intimate liaisons. Yudi’s first gay experience occurred in a lavatory, a common phenomenon in cities like Kolkata and Delhi, where such facilities enabled encounters ranging from tender moments to sexual acts (Das, 2020). In tropical India, societal stigma necessitated subtle gestures and eye contact to signal interest, circumventing detection. Parks in Delhi became discreet hubs for gay intimacy, providing a veiled space for individuals to connect anonymously, relying on subtle cues for identification (Patnaik, 2019). To avoid scrutiny, individuals opted for clandestine encounters in public spaces. Yudi secured partners by offering a private location, and to safeguard privacy, he employed a precautionary measure of blindfolding partners at his home, ensuring anonymity and discretion.

This underscores the precarious and marginalised position of the queer community in tropical India, where their voices are frequently disregarded and relegated to the periphery. Yudi’s partners, who acquiesce to his proposals with trepidation, are cognisant of the potential repercussions of public exposure, including societal ostracism and ignominy, and thus refrain

from displaying any affection in public settings, lest they incur the wrath of a heteronormative society. Moreover, Milind, who conceals his true identity beneath the alias 'Kishore', harbours a deep-seated fear that Yudi's profession as a journalist could precipitate the exposure of his homosexuality, a prospect laden with societal disgrace and potentially calamitous consequences, thereby highlighting the pervasive culture of fear and secrecy that pervades the lives of queer individuals in India.

A city is a place where the hegemonic class or the class in power exerts their power through different mechanisms. Ideological state apparatuses are diverse ways to propagate the discourse of heteronormativity. In *The Boyfriend Bombay* is shown as a space where sexual norms are transgressed. Yudi's apartment, the gay bar, the modeling agency, the loo, etc., are avenues of escape. These queer spaces are liminal spaces that offer a kind of alternative to the disciplines and routines of modern city life. The city epitomizes rationality and heteronormativity, whereas the liminal spaces valorize the play of human sexuality. The city becomes a metaphor for closeted gay men. Most of the people are unaware of queer spaces. Though the city offers anonymity, Milind and Yudi are always under surveillance. The novel depicts the dynamics of male homophobia, the irrational fear or intolerance of gay men, that serves the function of keeping men within the boundaries of traditionally defined role. Bombay becomes a site of contradictions- it produces queer spaces, and it is also a place where sexuality is politicized.

### **CONCLUSION**

Thus, it can be safely concluded that R. Raja Rao, through the story, has interwoven the social fabric of 1990s which juxtaposes both the expression and repression of sexuality. The success of the novel lies in the fact that it has touched social and private life of Yudi and Milind together and also as separate males belonging to two different strata of the community. The book is extremely important from the point of literary history as it sets to mainstream the hitherto marginalized subject of sex, sexuality and male homosexual desire. Further, the novel amply highlights the closely related aspects of sexuality like desire, pleasure, anxiety, control, and need.

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