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## A Study of Homosexual Sub-culture in R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*

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### **Abstract:**

R. Raj Rao's novel *The Boyfriend* is all about homosexual relationships in which there are certain places and other things which are known to gays only. There are many places like public toilets, apartments, modelling agency, restaurant, disco and media which is known or common for gays. They go there and enjoy their sex life without being felt marginalized. There is also the issue of dual sexual identity and to keep it hidden how those people manage their public life as well as private life in which they are different from the heterosexual society. Through this paper an attempt is made to study the places where gays frequently go and what makes those places different from other places where gays feel comfortable.

**Keywords:** Homosexual, Heterosexual, Marginalization, Sexual Identity, Queer.

In Indian culture and society, man woman relationship or heterosexual relationship is considered normative in comparison to homosexual relationship. Sex is considered as taboo and it is not openly discussed in Indian culture. In this scenario, R. Raj Rao comes with his novel *The Boyfriend* which is considered one of the most controversial and talked about fiction in Indian English literature because of its subject related to homosexuality and marriage between same sex. *The Boyfriend* is credited with India's first gay novel which openly talks about the people of different sexual orientation as compared to normative heterosexuality.

This novel presents the sub-culture of homosexuals in which there are symbols, a particular language and other related things which are commonly understood by homosexuals. There is a different world of homosexuals which is 'normal' for them. There are certain places

which are frequented by homosexuals only and not considered of importance by the people of other sexuality.

When it comes to places or 'queer places', media and public place, there are public toilets also called loo. Public toilets are used only to urinate but Rao describes it as the perfect place or the 'space' for homosexuals to find their sex partner. Through the central character Yudhister, known as Yudi, its 'value' is mentioned. He is a freelance journalist who goes to the loo at Churchgate in search of a suitable boy as an inserting partner. This very beginning of the novel asserts not only his sexual preference but also the use of place. Like him, other gays also visit these places for the same reason. This public toilet at Churchgate is considered as one of the best places for gays to pick up the suitable partner of their choice. There is a lot of options available round the clock and this is the reason that Yudi and people like him prefer to visit often. This toilet is mentioned in the following lines:

Yudi went into the loo again... All the drawings were in pencil or ball pen and depicted outsized erect penises and generous testicles. Indians will never stop being obsessed by size; he said to himself. The visuals were surrounded by names, mostly of flowers: Gulab, Champa, Chameli. Below the names of were phone numbers. 'Do you have ten inch cock?' someone asked. 'Then I am letting you put whole thing in my ass.' (Rao 4-5)

In this way the loo or gents' toilet has different kinds of invitation to people of same sexual interest. This is the world or paradise for the people of same taste which is not known to heterosexuals.

Like this loo, there are restaurants and the media which is known and meant for homosexuals only. This is the underbelly of the metro city where sub-culture lies and known only to those who are of the same interest. *Bombay Dost* is one such magazine for homosexuals who are interested in marrying a homo. It will not be out of place to mention some advertisements published in the magazine in this way:

Hi! I'm Raja, age 25, slim, slightly hairy, of brown complexion. Would like to meet gays of my age or below. I am eager to meet gays from Tamilnadu, Kerala, or Bangalore. South Indians turn me on. Write to Raja, BD Box No 109/23....  
'And listen to this one ...Young, 28-year-old Transvestite Drag Queen loves the

feminine life. And still a virgin, homely, passive. Offers himself for a lifelong relationship with a wealthy, aggressive, sincere, honest male from any part of the world. Willing to settle anywhere in the world with you when we learn to get along. Write to R.M. BD Box No 109/4.' (Rao)

*Bombay Dost* magazine is famous among homosexuals. They have their own world where same-sex relationship is not considered queer or against the normative heterosexuality. These types of advertisements cannot be published in the common or ordinary magazines and newspapers as this is considered subversive. This community is considered as 'other' in the mainstream culture. Shiksha Bala and Tanu Gupta argues regarding the marital affair between homosexual in the following words:

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. (Shiksha and Tanu 106)

After toilets and magazine, there are discos meant only for homosexual. They find it suitable for them because of the same kind of visitors. Whatever they ask is not considered as queer or different. Nobody looks at with surprise. There is a particular discourse which is nearly impossible to understand. They do not talk in simple words. Code words are used at the disco like 'Are you a plug or a socket, love?', 'Koti ho ya panthi?', graffiti on the wall also meant for homosexuals like "BACKDOOR ENTRY BEST, one painted slogan said. ADAM WAS MADE FOR ADAM JR., said another. A third reversed the laws of Physics: LIKE POLES ATTRACT, UNLIKE POLES REPEL." (Rao 93). This world belongs to homosexuals where they feel free.

Azad Maidan is also a famous hotspot for homosexuals. Yudi remembers his first experience of gay love while going to Press Club which is situated near Azad Maidan. Gay culture is also mentioned in the following lines:

... Yudi had his first taste of gay love in the Azad Maidan way back in 1970s. He remembered the incident clearly, as if it happened yesterday. He was on his way home from a 6 to 9 show of *Bobby* at the Excelsior... In no time at all, he was engulfed in pitch-black darkness. As he trained his eyes to see in the dark, one man after another, who all came from the Metro side in an endless stream, approached him. All of them cruised him in their own inimitable ways: some flashed, others had their hands on their crotches. Yudi, only twenty then, was intensely aroused. When he unzipped his trousers to pee, as everyone there did, he was already as hard a grinding stone. No sooner did his sword emerge from its sheath, than the entire company of cruisers swooped down on him. The crowd began to paw Yudi. He was the youngest among them, and a brand new entrant to their club. Each one wanted to take it upon himself to initiate this lanky boy into the pleasures of banned love. Yudi did not stave off his molesters. He enjoyed what was going on, and the need to get it all out of his system became very strong. Without much ado, he slipped his hand into the hand of someone he found ravishing; together, they went to quieter part of the maidan. Ignoring everyone else who followed them, cutting out preliminaries, Yudi and his partner masturbated each other, as many from the cruising company, and the starts in the moonless sky, looked on. (Rao 47-48)

People like Yudi becomes active in the dark to look for the partner. Bombay's (Now Mumbai) gay or homosexual culture is mentioned as:

As soon as it became dark, he cruised. He had land A to Z of all the loos in South Bombay where men had sex with men. He bought it from the office of *Bombay Dost*, for which he occasionally wrote. He popped in at all or some of these loos every evening between 7 and 8. The stinking places were always humming with erotic activity. Orgies in the dark, amidst piss and shit. (Rao 28-29)

These lines give the glimpse of the sub-culture in the metro cities where different types of activities are done. Loos are not only loos, rather they are the meeting points for those who are in need of sex. It is the world of those who do not belong to the mainstream society and it has become the culture of the city that homos love the smell of piss and are unable to have orgasm until they experience the foul smell of the urine. It is the reason that Yudi goes to

different loos to find his partner for the night. Yudi is not concerned with the kind of sex partner. He also loves to have sex with different types of people on different and unusual places.

*The Boyfriend* is not only about the sexual relations between Yudhister and Milind, rather it throws light on the world of homosexuals which exists but not seen.

Regarding different favourite places of homosexual community, Aakankhita Sharma considers that places like loos, local train compartments and gay bar are other examples of queer spaces. She argues:

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. (Sharma 18)

Besides some particular places, sex tourism is also discussed. People who go different tourist places which are not common are the sights for those who want to enjoy the quality time with their partners. Yudi and Milind goes there. Yudi searches for the places which are not frequented by the most people as he wants to have sex with his partner and not very much interested in the place or the sights of the place. He goes there to enjoy the company of his love.

Another place is also mentioned in the novel which caters to the need of gays is the agency known as A.K. Modelling agency. Though the name is related to modelling but it is related to the male or gay prostitution. This agency provides boys to the elite class of the metro city. This agency is introduced as:

A.K. Modelling Agency was a gurukul. At least that was how it's owner, a leading Bollywood star, thought of it. This gentleman was bisexual, but strictly closeted. In a mainstream occupation like Hindi films, where heroes had to be tough and macho (and strictly hetero), he couldn't afford to be open about his sexual preferences.... In order to deal with the difficult situation in which he found himself, the star, Ajay Kapur, floated his agency, nay, gurukul, which gave him a splendid opportunity to lead a double life: to be a hetero by day and homo by night. He appointed half a dozen recruiting agents on monthly salaries that would put IIM graduates to shame. Their business was to go round Bombay's colleges, massage parlours, gyms, discos, locker rooms and loos, to scout and recruit. (Rao 177)

This description of the modelling agency throws light on the model of work in which there are boys for the gays. The owner understands that many people from the elite class like him have different sexual preference and they cannot go to the public places to find suitable boys. Those people don't want to disclose their sexual identity. They live dual sex life. To keep their sexual identity hidden, they go to the modelling agency for their needs. In the novel *Hostel Room 131* sexual identity is considered important from the point of view of society in which the central character Sudhir wants to become a woman to legitimate his relationship, he says the following words:

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. (Rao 204)

In this way, people with dual identity want to be far from the heterosexual society and remain in less frequented spaces where they are not known. This sub-culture of Bombay (now Mumbai) or other metro cities where elite homosexuals have their own spaces for the sexual activity other than compulsory heterosexuality. It is mentioned in the following lines:

... The usual hot spots were five star hotels, beaches, massage parlours and pubs. However, field workers were given strict instructions not to solicit wankers at railway station loos. The agency administration believed that loos

were downmarket places, while that they aimed at was an upmarket clientele that wouldn't cringe when it came to parting with hard cash in exchange for hard-ons. (Rao 184-185)

Through these lines, it becomes clear that the high-class fulfills their desires in their way. They spend on the standard and the agency maintains that standard.

When one client Sameer Shah, a copywriter by profession, chooses Milind for his sex purpose and drives towards Malad to his shack situated at Madh Island. He tells Milind that he uses this shack for his 'shauk' (hobby or interest), because he wants to hide his sexual preference from his wife or grown-up sons. When Milind asks Sameer's sexual orientation, he says that "You see, I used to be active when I was younger, but now I'm passive, because as a man grows older, his hardback penis becomes a paperback one" (Rao 187). Sam's assertion of his sexual orientation throws light on the dark side of the bright looking world of class. He reveals that he has been active homosexual but due to his age he has now become passive. He hides his sexual preference from his wife also. He married for the sake of society to be a man of the mainstream society but he has not left his sexual preference even after marriage. After the overnight, Sam drops Milind home in his Contessa and gives him a smart tip of hundred rupees.

Like Sameer Shah there are clients of status who take their partners to different spaces which are not easily available to the common man. They are the people who has privacy on priority. Not only this they spend lavishly not only for the venue but partner also. It is described as:

... but that didn't hinder him from getting picked up by ad men, mad men, corporates, corporators, and once a retired Army General. Everything from start to finish happened in the poshest of surroundings. They drove in air-conditioned Esteems and Honda Citys. And they copulated in hotels, motels, farmhouses, beach houses, holiday inns and holiday resorts (where they resorted to maximum masti). Milind's sugar daddies treated him to the rarest scotch, the weirdest cocktails, and always, on his insistence, the costliest dish on any menu. At that time of parting, they also tipped the boys handsomely. (Rao 200)



These lines regarding different types of the clients present the hidden side of Bombay's gay sub-culture. It depicts that people of high-class are so much obsessed with homosexuality that they spend lavishly on their sexual preference while hiding their sexual identity at the same time.

Regarding the particular places and media, it comes to light that the people who are heterosexual by day and homosexuals by night or the people with dual identity in the society want to hide their sexual identity because homosexuals are considered as 'others' and queer in the normative heterosexual culture. In heterosexual society homosexuality is seen as something shameless activity. It is mentioned in the novel that Yudi and Milind goes to the doctor for the treatment of warts, the doctor reacts in following way:

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. (Rao 152)

To conclude, Yudi and Milind's sexual relationship presents the sub-culture of Bombay (now Mumbai) where gays have certain places to meet and experience their homosexual activities. Rao boldly presents the homosexuality in Indian culture and how it is widely popular among middle as well as high-class people. Gays have developed the sub-culture in which there are suitable 'spaces' for them. Regarding queer spaces or the sub-culture of Bombay (now Mumbai), Shiksha Bala and Tanu Gupta argues:

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. 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. (Shiksha and Tanu 111)

In this way gays have their own world in which they can comfortably enjoy their sexual preference while keeping their identity concealed in the sexual scripts. This sub-culture is the repercussion of the normative heterosexuality in which homosexuals are not considered as queer and others.

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