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DEBUNKING THE BINARY OF URBAN/RURAL: CHALLENGES, INTIMACY AND ALIENATION IN R RAJ RAO'S NOVELS, *THE BOYFRIEND* AND *HOSTEL ROOM 131*

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Abstract:

In India and elsewhere, the dominant narrative of queer life-trajectories has been focused on leaving small villages in search of bigger, presumably more anonymous cities where a sense of emancipation from heteronormative societal mores and familial duties may be imagined and experienced. LGBTQ people's lived experiences are undoubtedly shaped by their geographic identities, which can result in persecution, displacement, and relocation. There has been a little urban bias in studies on gay identities and queer settings. Literary imagination portrays the rural queers and their experiences as problematic and rural spaces as oppressive backward places that must be abandoned for queer liberation. Rural-to-urban migration is the foundation of queer life worlds. The metropolitan environment is portrayed as a paragon of openness in contrast to the rural gay living. Such spatial movements should be seen as a reworking of the conventional as well as a confrontation and reconstruction of identities rather than merely absorption. They are not just a transition from tradition to modernity. Questioning the strict notion of queer visibility/invisibility is one of the recurrent themes in queer studies. It is urgently necessary to oppose the normalisation of queer research's urban-centric metronormativity. The urban setting is connected with being out and proud, whereas the rural setting is associated with being closed off and homophobic in fictional and narrative portrayals of gay identities. The idea of an urban paradise for queer identities creates a binary separation where LGBT exposure is viewed as impractical outside of major cities. Understanding and experiencing sexual citizenship must go beyond the urban/rural divide since being queer is a fragmented experience.

*In view of the above inference, this paper looks into two novels by R. Raj Rao - *Hostel Room 131* and *The Boyfriend*. The former novel is set in a hostel of Pune while the latter in the metropolitan city of Mumbai. While the setting of both the novels is predominantly urban, the characters with whom the protagonists in both the novels fall in love with belong to or had migrated from semi-rural settings. This paper attempts to look into the fragmented and differential realities of queer lives which have to be navigated through urban consumption, gender binaries, heteronormativity, class expectations and caste limitations and henceforth*



debunk the myth of urban/rural dichotomy which equates urbanity with modernity and acceptance and rurality with tradition and orthodoxy.

Keywords: *Urban/Rural, Metronormativity, Heteronormativity, Queer Spaces, etc.*

In India and elsewhere, the dominant narrative of queer life-trajectories has been focused on leaving small villages in search of bigger, presumably more anonymous cities where a sense of emancipation from heteronormative societal mores and familial duties may be imagined and experienced. LGBTQ people's lived experiences are undoubtedly shaped by their geographic identities, which can result in persecution, displacement, and relocation. There has been a little urban bias in studies on gay identities and queer settings. Literary imagination portrays the rural queers and their experiences as problematic and rural spaces as oppressive backward places that must be abandoned for queer liberation. Rural-to-urban migration is the foundation of queer life worlds. The metropolitan environment is portrayed as a paragon of openness in contrast to the rural gay living. The urban setting is connected with being out and proud, whereas the rural setting is associated with being closed off and homophobic in fictional and narrative portrayals of gay identities. Questioning the strict notion of queer visibility/invisibility is one of the recurrent themes in queer studies. It has become urgently necessary to oppose such normalisation of queer research's urban-centric metronormativity. Spatial movements should be seen as a reworking of the conventional as well as a confrontation and reconstruction of identities rather than merely absorption. They are not just a transition from tradition to modernity. The idea of an urban paradise for queer identities creates a binary separation where LGBT exposure is viewed as impractical outside of major cities. Understanding and experiencing sexual citizenship must go beyond the urban/rural divide since being queer is a fragmented experience. According to Aniruddha Dutta, the development of identities in postcolonial South Asia has taken place amid contemporary power structures based on stark socioeconomic distinctions and rigorous caste politics.

In view of the above inference, this paper looks into two novels by R. Raj Rao - *Hostel Room 131* and *The Boyfriend*. The former novel is set in a hostel of Pune while the latter in the metropolitan city of Mumbai. While the setting of both the novels is predominantly urban, the characters with whom the protagonists in both the novels fall in love with belong to or had migrated from semi-rural settings. This paper attempts to look into the fragmented and differential realities of queer lives which have to be navigated through urban consumption, gender binaries, heteronormativity, class expectations and caste limitations and henceforth debunk the myth of urban/rural dichotomy which equates urbanity with modernity and acceptance and rurality with tradition and orthodoxy.

In societies with different cultures and social structures from those that gave rise to the specific construction of 'gay' and 'lesbian' identities, any application of universal norms of freedom and sexual identity would be ignoring the nuances and complexities that are a part of the lived experiences of many people and communities. And as Dennis Altman has noted, "the common thread is perhaps the growth of consumerism and individualism, features that seem more easily transferred with economic growth than specific political values" (Altman, 150). Where does such an analysis place the urban/rural divide in the context of queer lives? The answer does not lie in the simple dichotomy of associating the rural with the traditional and



the urban with the modern. Many people experience both sexual desire and a 'desire for modernity,' or a yearning to partake in the plenty and freedom shown in pictures of the wealthy world. The increasing globalization has led to an incessant migration of the rural population to the urban, especially those who do not have affluent means to survive in their villages. The migration in turn might mean other forms of inequality because the opportunities to benefit economically do not come through a simple process of migration from the rural to the urban. This causes greater challenges for survival for many people, including begging, minor criminality, and prostitution. The urban/rural divide thus consolidates with the class distinction that haunts the lived realities of many people in an urban setting.

The answer in this context thus seems not to lie in the reiteration of urban as modern and rural as traditional but to examine this gap in the discourse and reimagining newer ways to usher the political, social, and personal agenda of the queer. This important re-imagining of sexualities also helps us understand how intricate the construction of queerness is and that there are many different ways that queer people may 'be' and 'live'.

Rao's novels, *The Boyfriend* and *Hostel Room 131*, are both an important piece of literature when it comes to representing queer sexualities in India, especially the urban gay sub-culture. Rao being openly gay and a pioneer of queer studies in India is a significant persona for prompting an understanding of queer subjectivities. His works that are also autobiographical in many ways are a considerable catalyst for triggering difficult questions and responses in the queer research and subsequently the socio-political landscape of the country. Both the novels deal with the themes of caste-class distinctions, urban consumption, gendered expectations, spatial negotiations. The novels serve as a crucial location for the mapping of a fusion of concerns about urbanity, globalisation, modernity, and sexuality.

'Home' is one such concept that needs to be explored when looking into the dichotomy of urban-rural. Home is not only a place of memory but also of nostalgia, longing, and desire and serves as a critical space to look into the spatial discussions of literary imaginations. The working class that migrates from rural to urban spaces do not suddenly forgo their values, ideals, and beliefs in exchange of 'modernity'. The migrated communities and individuals carry and re-negotiate their values, ideals, and beliefs in new spaces. The need is to then look into these new spaces within the metropole with a more nuanced lens that the discourse of urban/rural duality simply ignores. In *The Boyfriend* Yudi, the protagonist cruises the loos of the Churchgate station to find a working-class man to have sex with. While Yudi belongs to the educated class with a job as a freelance journalist and a flat of his own, he falls in love with a man (Milind) who belongs to the blue-collared working class struggling to make ends meet. Milind lives in the unsophisticated part of the city with his parents and brothers, so whenever Yudi and Milind have to meet they use Yudi's flat. The flat in Nalla Sopara, appropriately called Mate House, thus becomes their utopic space where there are no limitations of the traditional, orthodox world. In some ways the flat seems to be synonymous with the literary imagination of the 'urban' where there is freedom and anonymity. Yudi and Milind are free to live as married people and go about their daily business in this utopic space without compromising on their ideals for survival as they have to do in the outside world. The outcasts find their haven in the invisibility of the private space and in return banish the outside world to the outside. But this episode of 'urban freedom' does not last long because of the



calling from home. Milind despite being a free man and enjoying the benefits of money and love, eventually finds his way back to the home of his parents. At once, it is decided that he is to marry a girl and he does not object. Upon breaking this news to Yudi, Milind says:

Stop being so weak - hearted. Take hold of yourself. Everyone gets married, and I too have to get married some day or the other. So why not now? I'm leaving. I have plenty of work. Got to distribute all these wedding cards before nightfall. Goodbye (Rao, *TB*, 211).

'Home' is thus important to Milind who cannot forgo his filial and societal attachments just to pursue his sexual and romantic interests. The urban setting of his life has not made him grab his freedom and cut all ties from his native setting in the pursuit of his sexual preferences. His priorities also include professional dignity, familial acceptance and societal validation. This is the kind of predicament that haunts the lives of the marginalised characters. Milind is not averse to embracing newer opportunities to explore his sexuality because of his proximity with a multi-cultural ethos that an urban setting provides. At the same time, he thrives on filial attachments, community values, and his nostalgia for 'home'.

In *The Hostel Room 131*, Siddharth a college lecturer falls in love with a boy of an engineering college in Pune. This boy Sudhir belongs to the small town named Belgaum. The small town resident moves to Pune for his studies and his hostel room becomes a place of sexual rendezvous for both Sudhir and Siddharth. Pune, a metropole despite being the space where Sudhir and Siddharth enjoy considerable freedom to continue with their affair, ends up being tragic for the characters. Eventually, they end up leaving for New-York, with an asylum visa to seek a better world. The dichotomy of urbanity as a modern space and rurality as an orthodox space does not hold intact in the novel. The lived realities of the characters are far more complicated to fit into this simple divide. While the semi-rural setting of Belgaum provides neighbourhood tank as the perfect meeting place for the village boys, the urban is threatened by constant surveillance of the law. This panopticon (Foucault) existence is then far less preferable to the anonymity provided in the rural settings. In Pune, the two out gay characters - Guarav and Vivek are expelled from their hostel rooms when someone complains of their 'lecherous' activities. This incident even serves as the front headlines of many media outlets. Even in the novel *The Boyfriend*, the urban setting of Mumbai serves as a site of constant surveillance. Yudi, who cruises Azad Maidan to find his sexual partners do so under the constant threat of being busted by the cops from the nearby Azad Maidan station. The dichotomy of urban as modern and rural as orthodox or traditional does not stand firm for the queer experiences in these novels. While gay visibility plays a significant part in political activity, queer people who live in rural areas have developed a strategic representational politics that offers fresh perspectives on how to advance social and political change without resorting to neoliberal visibility politics of the West that is synonymous with 'modernity' and 'urbanity'. It is crucial to pay attention to how homosexual men and women use the strictest and least accepting environments as their own to make their identities known for a more nuanced understanding of queer subjectivities, desires, aspirations and needs. The politics of visibility that is so synonymous with the 'urban' and the West might not be desired way for



people migrating from or living in the rural settings as well as the 'urban' of India which is not backed by queer friendly laws.

Understanding the variety of localised queer identities, including local family systems and even language, is necessary. Based on class dynamics, these communities are frequently mocked and rejected within elite homosexual organisations for being overly loud or vulgar. In *The Boyfriend*, Yudi's flat at Nalla Sopara, otherwise a perfect haven for both Yudi and his 'yaar' is after all a space owned by an upper-class man. Milind's appearance and activities were a transgression of the ways that upper-class people approved of. Yudi makes Milind groom according to what he considers appropriate. "Later that day, they trekked to a nearby saloon for a haircut and a shave. A sort of ritual cleansing. Yudi laughed, for he was a fussy Brahmin and it wouldn't do for the Dalit boy to be unkempt and long-haired in this house" (Rao, *TB*, 102). For Yudi, a purification rite wasn't complete till one's nails had also been cut. He looked at Milind's fingernails and was repelled by the sight of the black rim of muck crowning them. The toenails were jagged" (Rao, *TB*, 103).

Yudi, who has a fetish for 'filth' deliberately, chooses low-class boys to have sex with but at the same time he is 'repelled' and 'disgusted'. Milind eventually gets tired of Yudi's condescension and joins A. K. Modelling agency to get independence where he gets up getting further exploited. It is lose-lose situation for Milind if he chooses to remain queer in this urban setting. Eventually, he ends up in a heterosexual marriage arranged by his parents.

In *Hostel Room 131*, the issue of class persists between the two lovers. Siddharth, an urban lad living in Mumbai was committing a double sacrilege by being a homosexual and to top it all by being involved with a semi-rural boy. When Sudhir visits Siddharth's house in Mumbai, Siddhartha's parents are appalled at their son's choice:

The parents, who were silent spectators to their son's absences, were appalled on meeting Sudhir. As they saw him eat with his fingers or grope for the right English words during a conversation, they felt that their son had let them down. 'Where did we go wrong?' his mother sobbed. They also saw that Sudhir came from a family that, by their standards at least, wasn't urbane. His clothes looked worn and, whenever he passed by, a sweaty odour emanated from them (Rao, *HR*, 70-71).

Another point to consider while debunking the urban/rural dichotomy is that the institutionalized and organized sectors of metropolises do not provide the same services and treatment to everyone. Queer is further marginalized in the organized sector, especially in a country that struggles with massive caste and class distinctions. Siddharth finds it very hard to lodge a police complaint when his boyfriend Sudhir is locked in a room by his family members in *Hostel Room 131*. What relation he can claim with his boyfriend to accelerate the seriousness of the matter in the eyes of the police. "What locus standi does my complaint have? Am I his father or mother or brother or sister? Or uncle or aunt or cousin or nephew or niece? No! It's in my best interests to forget the whole matter and go about my business. I should not waste the officer's time" (Rao, *HR*, 7), ruminates Siddharth. The poignant sense of being an outcast and alone reveals in the desperate statements of Siddharth, "I don't know if I am doing the right thing. Besides, I'm completely alone in this, while the rest of the universe



is on the other side” (Rao, *HR*, 12). In *The Boyfriend* too, Yudi has to show his press card to enter inquire about his lost boyfriend at the police station and at the morgue. The law and the culture in India, both do not give credibility to bonds outside ‘family’ and the definition of family is institutionally safeguarded. The urban in this sense fails to be liberating the queer lives and further marginalizes them by not allowing equitable participation in the organized institutions and system. The outcasts whether rural or urban remain so if they happen to live queer lives with no opportunity for institutional redemption. This is not to say that the participation in heteronormative system is the need of the queer movement. Assimilationist politics is a topic for discussion that extends beyond the scope of this paper.

In his essay ‘Homosexuals in Surprising Places?’ John Howard sharply criticises the practice of conducting gender and sexuality studies outside of major cities. While there is a struggle to guarantee that private places like malls and superstores in small towns respect freedom of expression, Howard contends that it is equally important to pay attention to how homosexual men and women are reclaiming the most traditional and inhospitable areas to affirm their identity. Homosexuals undoubtedly experience alienation in both rural and urban centers. It is less about the locale and more about the community support and opportunities to be free when it comes to exercising sexual choices. Urban settings provide anonymity but the rural communities are a great source of comfort and belongingness. Anarkali, in *The Hostel Room 131*, was born in Belgaum. Belonging to a small town and lower class she never has the means to have a sex change operation that would transform her from a boy to a girl. She soon leaves home and finds companionship amongst the hijra community. “Anarkali too felt much more at ease with her fellow hijras, most of them with personal histories similar to hers, than she did with her own family” (Rao, *HR*, 91). The bonhomie that is found in such communities is quite unmatched with the alienation and anonymity of the urban settings. ‘Modernity’ does not necessarily mean uniform emancipation and guaranteed happiness to all and sundry. “What the hijras wouldn’t trade off for all the gold in the goldfields of Karnataka was the sense of community that their new identities provided. They may not have degrees, diplomas, well-paying jobs, bank balances, flats, cars and colour TV sets. But they had found happiness” (Rao, *HR*, 92).

Class distinctions make up a major theme in both novels of Rao. Yudi, in *The Boyfriend*, is an openly gay character who does not have to hide and lead dual lives. His editors, mother, and friends despite coaxing him here and there for heterosexual relationships, knew that he was a homosexual man and preferred men over women. His class bestows on him the freedom to not succumb to society’s wishes. Milind on the other hand, has to keep up a lot of pretenses about his sexuality in order to survive. Choice is a privilege that only upper class can afford, one that carries greater sanctions for some people than others. And Milind was not born into that privilege. He willingly goes back to his parents’ house and gets married to a woman. In Milind’s worldview, the institution of marriage is something to be emulated and heterosexuality to be practiced. Despite being in the urbane circle, he could not just leave his community values aside and embrace the so-called ‘modernity’ that is not even backed up by law. And when the characters, in *The Hostel Room 131*, do leave their family, jobs, friend-circle behind, they choose a life of freedom which comes hand-in-hand with alienation and another host of complexities.



In this context, it can be inferred that the urban/rural divide where urban is synonymous with personal growth and freedom and rural with orthodoxy and restraint, does not hold intact. Especially when queer lives come into the context, the interplay of caste-class, gender, income, education is far too complex to have a reductionist viewpoint. Queer research cannot work on the premise that 'urban' is a place of freedom for queer lives plain and simple. It is crucial to assert that sexuality-based work undertaken by NGOs and CBOs has almost always viewed the rural space as one of inequality and neglect in order to challenge the general lens of queerness and the urban/rural divide as an object of analysis and to comprehend the geographic politics of this space. It is very necessary to oppose the normalisation of queer research's urban oriented metronormativity (Halberstam).

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To Cite the Article: *Srivastava, Yashvi*. "Debunking the Binary of Urban/Rural: Challenges, Intimacy and Alienation in R. Raj Rao's Novels, *The Boyfriend* and *Hostel Room 131*." *Literary Cognizance*, IV - 3 (December, 2023): 126-132. Web.