



Gender Hegemonic: Negotiating Identity in the 'Hostel Room 131' by R Raj Rao

Author

Ms Devarshi Modi
Research Scholar,
Department of English, School of
Languages,
Gujarat University,
Navarangpura, Ahmedabad.

Co-Author

Prof. (Dr) Jagdish Joshi
Director- Professor,
MMTTC, UGC-HRDC, Gujarat University,
Navarangpura, Ahmedabad.

Abstract:

The Present paper revolves around the comparative analysis of R Raj Rao through the lens of Queer theory. For undertaking the research, the Researcher has selected two books by each author. The Study is an attempt to study the phenomenon of sexual instinct with special Study of homosexual theories and its application to the selected works. The paper pays attention towards sexual politics, socio-political crisis, dual identity crisis, and loss of self in proving oneself. The Paper is verbatim of hegemonic structure and characters breaking the traditional notion. The paper will pay attention to three different dimensions towards the character's portrayal. Here, the Study undertaken has selected four novels its comparison. Gender and Sex though different roles pay quite an important role in building up social structure. The conventional role of masculinity is being tough, contentious and competitive, while femininity demands that women be malleable and benign. Queer talk and the politics of transgression in the novels of Rao and Selvadurai project the close relation between identity, liberation, politics of pro-sex and essentialization of what kind of sex counts as progressive and Transgressive.

Key Words: Conventional, Femininity, Gender, Hegemonic Structure, Heterosexuality, Identity, Masculinity, Queer talk, Sexual Politics

Introduction:

The discourse on gender and sexuality in Indian literature has gradually evolved from marginal invisibility to nuanced representation. R. Raj Rao, through his literary oeuvre, has been instrumental in carving a space for queer narratives in postcolonial India. His novel *Hostel Room 131* foregrounds the conflicts of sexual minorities negotiating their identities within heteronormative spaces.

The novel's setting—a university hostel—functions as a microcosm of Indian society, where the pressures of masculinity and heteronormativity manifest in both overt and covert ways. Examining gender hegemony in this narrative offers critical insight into how identities are policed and how queer subjects reclaim agency.

Rao only provides a partial quotation of Foucault (1996), whose full assertions as follows:

The problems still very current: between the affirmation “I am homosexual” and the refusal to say it, lies a very ambiguous dialectic is a necessary affirmation since it's the affirmation of a right, but at the same time's a cage and a trap. One day the question, “Are you a homosexual?” will be as natural as the question “Are you a bachelor?” But, after all, why would one subscribe to this obligation to choose? One can never stabilize oneself in a position; one must define the use that one makes of according to the moment (Foucault 369)

Foucault's stances not, as Rao suggests, "Utopian". He does briefly hint at an idealized future, but his statement regarding the possibility of stabilising “one self in a position” suggests that a linear progression towards a tells of egalitarianisms simply not possible: “homosexual” and “bachelor” can never achieve absolute parity because their usage can never be static. Rao has selectively marshalled Foucault's words not to debunk "utopian statements", but to consolidate his own brand of queer utopianism through careful differentiation. By focusing on the distinction between the terms “bachelor” and “homosexual”, instead of Foucault's insistence on their epistemological and ontological instability, he begins to suggest that queerness substantive and cannot have equivalence with other denotations of identity.

Hence, he argues:

What does gay identity mean? It means, for one, that though we possess multiple identities and are fragmented subjects, identity based on sexual orientations not subsumed by previous categories of race, class and gender. If these identities intrude, so that a white gay man foregrounds skin colour his dealings with a gay Asian or African, or a gay prince like Prince Manvendra, a contemporary Rajput prince from Rajpipla, Gujarat, foregrounds class his dealings with, say, a gay servant his father's palace, then perhaps time for queerness to secede from the union identity markers, and establish self as an autonomous category. (p.xviii-xix)

Rao's rhetoric of intrusion recognises that in practice "gay identity" can be violently and unjustly compromised by other identifications, but he suggests that homosexuality must be subsumptive to have any utility. This position is tenuous, particularly in a nation as pluralist as India, where factors such as class, caste, race, religion, language and birthplace in the formulation of identity, inevitably overlapping with and often superseding the self-identifications of 'gay', 'queer' and 'homosexual'. Then incipient call for an autonomous and unalloyed queerness surely betrays a utopianism far greater than that of Foucault.

For a city that has more homosexuals than London and Paris put together, Mumbai's gay subculture has been a well-kept secret. R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*, however, is telling it all. Yudi, a freelance journalist in Nalla Sopara and an out gay man finds in his 40s that sex with strangers just doesn't cut it for him anymore. Cruising through the first few chapters is an orgasmic overdose from Cuffed Parade to Kandivli, after which you will not be able to see the lavatories of Churchgate station in the same way ever again. Even certain bogies of certain trains, certain areas of certain parks stop being mere public facilities and come into view for what they are: forums for feverish homosexual activity, where all kinds of men, rich and poor, beggars and thieves, come to hustle other men. Some are seasoned old fags, some bright-eyed boy wonders, and many, many others are married men taking a quick detour on their way home to their wives, their other lives. (Sahgal)

- **Negotiating Identity in Hostel Room 131**

The protagonist's journey in R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131* is emblematic of the continuous oscillation between desire and repression that characterizes queer existence in heteronormative spaces. The university hostel functions not merely as a residential setting but as a symbolic site of social surveillance, gender policing, and identity performance, encapsulating the broader societal mechanisms that enforce hegemonic masculinity.

1. Space as Surveillance

The physical layout and communal nature of the hostel amplify the visibility of queer desire, making privacy a rare commodity. The constant presence of roommates, shared bathrooms, and the general lack of personal space transform the hostel into a panoptic environment where students are compelled to conform to heteronormative behaviors. As Michel Foucault's notion of panopticism suggests, surveillance need not be overt to be effective; the mere possibility of being observed is sufficient to regulate desire and behavior. In the novel, the protagonist's private longings are continually tempered by this surveillance, where every gesture risks exposure and, consequently, social ridicule or ostracism.

2. Peer Pressure and Hegemony

The hostel culture is steeped in the rituals of hegemonic masculinity, where heterosexuality is the assumed norm. Masculinity is performed through homosocial bonding—activities such as late-night conversations, teasing, and collective participation in heterosexist humor—that reinforce a shared identity among the male students. This peer-enforced culture of heteropatriarchy functions as a subtle but pervasive form of policing. Any deviation from the expected codes of behavior—such as a softer demeanor, lack of interest in discussing women, or avoidance of aggressive camaraderie—is immediately noticed and subjected to ridicule. The protagonist is thus coerced into a performative negotiation of selfhood, where desire must remain invisible to ensure survival in the social hierarchy of the hostel.

3. Moments of Subversion

Despite the pervasive atmosphere of repression, *Hostel Room 131* also presents cracks in the hegemonic structure, where acts of queer intimacy emerge as moments of subversion. These private encounters—fleeting touches, secret meetings, or unspoken emotional connections—represent acts of silent resistance against the monolithic order of heteropatriarchy. In these moments, the protagonist reclaims agency, asserting a queer presence in a space otherwise defined by exclusion. Such transgressive acts transform the hostel into a paradoxical space: it is simultaneously a site of oppression and a locus of liberation, where the clandestine expression of desire challenges the authority of normative gender codes.

Rao's narrative captures this dialectical experience of identity negotiation with striking realism. The fluidity of identity emerges as a survival strategy, with the protagonist oscillating between outward conformity and inner authenticity. The internalized trauma resulting from this tension—marked by guilt, fear, and self-surveillance—reflects the psychological toll of living under hegemonic gender expectations. Yet, within this oppressive architecture, the protagonist's ability to carve moments of connection and self-expression signals the resilient and adaptive nature of queer identity in the face of systemic silencing.

Being gays a culture within a culture rather can be termed as a subculture. Since centuries, homosexual identity has been stigmatized and thrown to the margins. To the extent that the community of people possessing alternative entities have felt ashamed to acknowledge and express it. It has hardly ever got an voice from the closet that has been and Evert has come out the open has only encountered rebuke and ridicule. R. Raj Rao being an ardent gay rights activist has brought all in the open through his novel *Hostel Room 131*. He had pride for his entity and his sexual orientation. He questions the hegemonic patriarchal masculinity and the mindless reverence towards. Yudis his voice of protest against the front runners of a hegemonic masculinity. He gives the readers a very critical annoyed view of the realities of caste, class, religion, masculinity and the gay subculture as a whole in India.

One day the question, 'Are you homosexual?' will be as natural as the question, 'Are you a bachelor?'" Thiss a utopian statement, the signifier 'one day' pointing to the idealised future. Also, 'bachelor', unlike homosexual, is a neutral construct that implies a deferring of judgement, as well as an expression of choice – the choice to stay single. (p.xviii)

Conclusion:

Hostel Room 131 serves as both mirror and a critique of gender hegemony Indian society. Through the lens of the protagonist's identity negotiation, Rao challenges the binaries of gender and sexuality while highlighting the resilient nature of queer selfhood.

The novel ultimately portrays the act of existing authentically as a political resistance, offering insights into how literary spaces can confront and unsettle dominant heteropatriarchal structures. In his introduction to *Whistling the Dark* (2009), Rao makes explicit his mobilization of the signifier 'gay's the name of activism, and this strategic deployment has a correlative his interest queer politics. What he calls "the intrinsic quality of resistance built to queerness echoes the idealism surrounding the term that was co-opted by queer theory on the Anglo-American academic establishment of the early 1990s, in the wake of the formation of the anti-homophobic umbrella group Queer Nation New York.

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