



## A Literary and Social Depiction of an Indian City: *Masala*<sup>1</sup> Eroticism and Perverse Realism in Raj Rao's *BomGay*

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**Abstract.** *BomGay* is the major stage that the Indian English writer Raj Rao chooses in his literary work to represent the gay performances in Bombay. *BomGay* becomes an epitome of gay culture in India, which has to find its own (in)visible ways to survive, even today, when the oppressive section of the Indian Penal Code, 377, is still used to punish those who express their alternative sexualities. This paper examines the rich artistic performances of the gay underworld narrated in Rao's fictional city of *BomGay* that accurately envision a particular face of urban India. Firstly, I will focus on how the picture of unpleasantness and nastiness of the Indian masses is depicted as erotically natural in Rao's fiction. I will study the two major factors that always converge in the portrayal of the microcosm of *BomGay*, scatology and (homo)sexual explicitness, which provide the foundations for Rao's erotic realism, in order to combat hegemonic discourse and social oppression.

**Keywords:** Raj Rao's fiction, *BomGay*/Bombay, Section 377.

### [es] Una representación literaria y social de una ciudad india: Erotismo *Masala* y realismo perverso en *BomGay* de Raj Rao

**Resumen.** *BomGay* es el principal escenario que el escritor indio, Raj Rao, elige en su obra literaria para representar al colectivo gay en Bombay. *BomGay* se convierte en un ejemplo de la cultura gay en India, que tiene que encontrar sus propias formas (in)visibles para sobrevivir, incluso hoy en día en que la sección 377 del Código Penal indio está todavía vigente y se utiliza para castigar a quienes expresan una sexualidad alternativa. Este artículo examina la riqueza artística de la subcultura gay que Rao narra a través de la ciudad ficticia de *BomGay*, que detalladamente describe una de las realidades del mundo urbano indio. Primero me centro en la representación de lo desagradable y lo repugnante de las masas de población india, que en la ficción de Rao se describen como elementos eróticos. Examinó los dos factores que siempre convergen en el microcosmos de *BomGay*, el escatológico y una (homo) sexualidad explícita, que logran establecer las bases del realismo erótico en la obra del autor y combatir el discurso hegemónico y la opresión social.

**Palabras clave:** ficción de Raj Rao; *BomGay*/Bombay; Sección 377.

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<sup>1</sup> *Masala* is a mixture of ground spices used in Indian cooking. Here it is used in a metaphorical way.

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## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s India decides to join globalization by opening its markets to the world and implementing a series of economic reforms. This also comes with a revolution in the media and the world of communication: the great invasion of satellite and cable television together with the era of internet and the mobile phone will transform the visual panorama and influence the country's ways of thinking. The main recipients of these policies of liberalization of markets and revolution in communication and high technology are the middle classes who become more visible and powerful. The multiplicity of discourses, registers and great variety of images ring the alarm bell of peril, especially among a conservative society, who tends to be Hindu Right supporters. Debates on censorship follow and representations of what some call vulgarity and obscenity seem to have a direct connection with sexuality and desire. The language of desire is attacked and censored, whether in real life, on TV or in any artistic field. As a result, the Western academic sexual discourses adopted by some Indians trigger off controversy among moralists who qualify them as deplorable, corrosive and harmful for the national moral of the country. Moreover, this traditional morality is reinforced by two colonial laws, sections 292 and 377 (1872), which refer to the politics of obscenity and the criminalization of sodomy<sup>3</sup>. To offer resistance to these colonial laws and the legacy of Puritanical Victorian values and Judeo-Christian principles on morality and sexuality, a new phase begins in India in the 1990s with the emergence of a new literature by queer writers who mimetically depict the complexity of their own realities and queer subculture, which is more palpable in big cities.

BomGay, for example, is the major stage that the Indian English writer, R. Raj Rao, chooses in his literary work to represent the gay performances in the city of Bombay. Rao is one of the pioneering gay voices whose autobiographical work amazingly allows the reader to peep into the human microcosm of BomGay, a fictitious gay space for the real city of Bombay. In Rao's narrative BomGay becomes an epitome of the gay culture in India, which has to find its own (in)visible ways to survive in contemporary times, when the oppressive section of the Indian Penal Code, 377, is still used to threaten and punish those who express alternative sexualities, desires or same-sex love.

As a result, the aim of this paper is to examine the rich artistic performances of the gay underworld narrated in Rao's fictional city of BomGay that help us to envision a particular face of urban India. I will focus on how the picture of unpleasantness and nastiness of the Indian masses is depicted as erotically natural in Rao's fiction. I will also examine the two major factors that always converge in the portrayal of the microcosm of BomGay, scatology and (homo)sexual explicitness, which provide the foundations for R. Raj Rao's erotic realism to combat hegemonic discourse.

## 2. The Indian Gay Scenario

What does being gay in India mean? Is it possible to claim a universal identity such as 'gay' in the hybrid multicultural India of contemporary times? Dennis Altman in

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Suhrith Pathasarathy's article "To Be Equal Before the Law" in *The Hindu* (July 9, 2016) and "Five-judge Constitution Bench to Take a Call on Section 377" by Drishnadas Rajagopal in *The Hindu* (February 2, 2016).

“Global Gaze/Global Gays” writes: “In ways that would shock many anthropologists, a claim to the universality of “gay” and “lesbian” identities is emerging in the rhetoric groups such as (to speak only of Asia) Bombay Dost” (2001: 3). Altman maintains that there is no reason why Indian gays or lesbians should not import and assimilate a Western style and identity. The question that I am bringing is whether Anglo-American queer theory, with its particular terminology of ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’, ‘transsexual’ and ‘queer’, is appropriate enough to be applicable to the Indian context. As far as my research is concerned I can argue that from the 1990s onwards *some* emerging Indian movements may have adopted this terminology and “a Western life style”<sup>4</sup> but there are undoubtedly *many* other groups of people and representations of desires and sexual expressions to be subsumed only within the wide vision of queer or alternative. Moreover, Indian scholars like Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai in *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000) not only use the term “queer” as the best representation of Indian sexualities but they also draw some similarity and parallelism between Indian ancient texts and queer theory. It is also worth pointing out that Pune University in India was the first to constitute the Queer Studies Circle, which confirms what Terry Eagleton argues that theory, in general terms, has become a lingua franca, a kind of universal language (Martín 2003). As a result the issue is how the different cultures make use of the theory according to their particular needs and cultural context.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, to which I will refer below, together with social pressures and the relevance of the family structure, coerced same-sex practitioners into seeking marriage as cover-up of what becomes a double life. The writer Hoshang Merchant in his edition of *Yaraana* (1999) writes that being ‘gay’ in India:

is not an ethic, not a religion, not a sub-culture, not a profession, not a sub-caste. Yet it is all-present, all pervasive, ever practised and ever secret. It comes upon you in unexpected places, in unexpected faces. It is shame, guilt, subversion ... honour and pride (204).

Merchant recognizes that he has trouble with the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’. The former is a Western construct, which does not appear in the Indian languages, and causes trouble to some Indians. As for the latter, ‘gay’, it is a political category, which embodies the ideal of two men going off together to make a life for themselves. This idea became the cornerstone of politics of gay liberation in the West, especially in the U.S.A., yet, it rarely exists in India. The process of reinventing and rediscovering new terms to describe sexual behaviours and identities has been vital. Naming and defining marks a crucial change in consciousness as it erases previous conceptions of sin, congenial disease or medicalization of homosexuality. For example, the Hindi-English dictionary has introduced the term ‘*sam-laingikta*’, which is a mere translation of “homosexuality”, to match the English entry. ‘*Humjinsi*’ comes from Urdu and has to do with the idea of being of the same nature, species or class; it also means a same-sex relationship. “*Dost*”, originally from Hindi, refers to male friends or lovers. Sultan Khan (1994) explains his own experience of “being called

<sup>4</sup> According to Altman claiming a gay / lesbian identity in non-Western countries has to do not only with sexuality but also with being Western. “Western” conveys the idea of being modern, international and liberal. However, Altman also adds that Asian gays, for example, in their effort to fight the dominant stereotypes of them as “feminine” and “passive” have adopted the Western gay style of the “macho”.

names” for his effeminate behaviour: in his native tongue, Gujarati, he was a ‘*bailo*’, that is to say ‘like a woman’; at college the terms were “pansy” and ‘homo’ in *English* (Indian English). There is also the term ‘*chakka*’, which is like ‘*bailo*’ but sometimes also used for *hijras* or eunuchs. Khan does not sympathize much with ‘*sam-laingik-ta*’ because it seems to focus on sex rather than love; he suggests other more accurate combinations like ‘homolover’ and ‘homolove’. *Khoti* and *panthi* are colloquial in Bombay for passive and active men: one takes the traditional sexual role of a masculine man (*panthi*) and the other of the feminine woman (*khoti*). Thus, “what matters is not the inherent nature of the act but the social construction of meanings and the individual response to that” (Weeks 1981: 117). The Indian term ‘*musti*’, meaning “mischief”, is also applied to allude to sex between men. ‘*Must*’ is a Hindi word, which refers to a strong smell of male hormones. Row Kavi explains: “Our term for elephants in heat is ‘must’ and young Indian boys who engage in gay sex are often joked about as being ‘elephants’ that is playful” (Brass 1999). ‘*Musti*’ is then enjoyable, not serious; ‘*musti*’ or the “mischief” is sex between men; therefore, it is believed that it is not entirely sex, not 100% sex, as it is not mentioned or discussed. ‘*Musti*’ is regarded as something that takes place along with marriage but it can never substitute it. Men who have sex with men, also referred to as MSM, do not talk about it, classify it or rationalize it. These men do not identify as gay or bisexual, as they are alien concepts and, thus, not applicable to their relations. Jeremy Seabrook points out that this kind of taboo relations leave the men and their sexual performances in “an acceptable penumbra” (Seabrook 1999: 62), as their nameless acts, bonds and relations, which are always played backstage at twilight, are integrated into their lives. The discovery and awareness of their attraction to men in their adolescence or early adulthood occurs, on many occasions, at weddings or family festivities. Seabrook’s research reveals that many relatives, often distant cousins or strangers, come to the celebration and share a bed with other young men due to lack of space. Both the eroticism of the event and the exciting atmosphere seem to provide the opportunity for sexual contact. The men’s recurrent metaphor to justify the sexual encounter is that “it is sex happening in sleep or in dreams” (Seabrook 1999: 6). This response seems to place sex between men within an imaginary world, which eventually hides part of their daily life. After initiation these men continue their search for homosexual partners in buses, parks, cruising grounds, public lavatories or other marginal places of big cities. These men, MSM, believe that being gay means playing the passive part in the sexual relation. So long as they perform the active part, whether with their wives or with other men, their masculinity is not questioned.

Owing to the archaic Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which has to be placed within the colonial context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with its fanatical Purity Campaigns and puritanical values, homosexuality in India has been criminalized since then. Since the 1990s there have been many different social movements of activists and intellectuals from various fields of knowledge, fighting together to repeal this colonial law. On Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2009, the Delhi High Court announced the decriminalization of homosexuality among consenting adults. Judges of the Delhi High Court affirm in a 105-page decision:

We declare that Section 377 IPC, insofar it criminalizes consensual sexual acts of adults in private, is violative of Articles 21, 14 and 15 of the Constitution. The

provisions of Section 377 IPC will continue to govern non-consensual penile non-vaginal sex and penile non-vaginal sex involving minors. By 'adult' we mean everyone who is 18 years of age and above [...] Secondly, we clarify that our judgment will not result in the re-opening of criminal cases involving Section 377 IPC that have already attained finality<sup>5</sup>.

The Court also stressed that one of the values deeply ingrained in Indian society, nurtured throughout the centuries, was inclusiveness, which was displayed in all aspects of life and recognized a role and place for everyone. For this reason those perceived as 'different' or even 'deviant' did not have to be excluded or harassed. However, soon after, many religious groups all over India who were discontented with this position, challenged the verdict of the High Court. The result was that on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013 the Supreme Court of India overturned the judgement and Section 377 was reinstated. Today litigation continues and is mainly carried out by The Naz Foundation (India) Trust, an organization that has spearheaded the legal battle in favour of Human Rights, which also works with other Human Rights Groups, such as Amnesty International and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. The eroticism of Indian nastiness

R. Raj Rao's stories are far from the exotic and Orientalized image of India. A country that lures the Westerner to a land of magic and reverie where the white female foreigner, as in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1991), who is enchanted by the beauty of the place and of the native men). Instead, Rao focuses on the unpleasantness and nastiness not only of India but of human nature. The city of Bombay or BomGay is the setting of most of his novels, short stories, poems and plays, and the two factors that always converge, scatology and (homo)sexual explicitness, provide the foundations for his display of erotic realism.

Crowds are frequently depicted in Indian English literature. In such a populated country, about 1200 million people, the masses often appear in the foreground or at the back of the stage of varied stories and plots. They can be protagonists of major historic events or simply perform a minor role. However, what distinguishes Rao from other writers who have made of the Indian crowds a picturesque and distinctive element of their literature is their eroticism. Indian masses are erotic and their ordinary scenes are also erotic for Rao: clusters of men gathering round stalls in markets are erotic; full trains with separate coaches for men and for women are erotic; parks, stations and streets of cities with their hustle and bustle are also erotic. However paradoxical, human nastiness is seducing and appears depicted as erotically natural, for example, the odour of human excreta and biological calls of defecating, urinating or breaking wind vividly epitomize the other side of Indian daily life. The Western reader, who has never been to India and then is not accustomed to witnessing these daily scenes, might be repelled or at least bewildered. Likewise, his or her counter-

<sup>5</sup> The whole text by The Delhi High Court decision can be read on line: <http://judis.nic.in/supremecourt/imgs1.aspx?filename=41070>

<sup>6</sup> See: The Naz Foundation (India) Trust. <http://nazindia.org/>

part, the Indian reader, is bound to find the passages describing the gay underworld, especially the ones taking place in public lavatories, perverse, aggressive, provocative and even primitive and brutish.

If we examine, for example, Rao's most awarded piece of work, *The Boyfriend* (2003), which is counted as the first genuinely gay novel written in India, from the very beginning of the first chapter the male protagonist, Yudi, admits that an urgent necessity drives him to the gents' toilet at Churchgate, an area in downtown South Bombay. He not only wants to empty his bladder but also to pick up someone with whom he can relieve his sexual anxieties. Yudi tells us that, "the odour of sweat from the young working-class body made his head spin" (Rao 2003: 7), and we deduce that his spinning is caused not by his repulsion and abhorrence but by his enjoyment. A few pages further on the story strikes the reader with the next lines:

The stinking places were always humming with erotic activity. Orgies in the dark, amidst piss and shit. The foul smell, somehow, made the sex more enjoyable. Having spent so much of his life in these loos Yudi had come to the conclusion that there was indeed something sensual about filth (2003: 28).

Yudi mockingly tells his friend Gauri that he is an "ammonia-queen", a "toilets addict". Showing some kind of reminiscence of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1972), Yudi, full of irreverent, peculiar dry humour, asserts that cruising public toilets and "hoping to find a new face and a new dick each time" (2003: 143) is the well kept secret of his youth. Similarly to Wilde's novel (1972), Yudi's "perverse" and "vile" behaviour maintain him young and healthy. Many readers can be scandalized by Yudi's account of his promiscuous and shocking life. Yet, the writer's transgressive effect is achieved and the subsequent interrogations of what promiscuity is about and how it correlates with morality and the gay subculture lie there in the air.

In *The Boyfriend* the heroes are from different castes and social classes but the writer dissolves their differences in their sexual and love encounter. For instance, Yudi is a gay identified freelancer in his early forties; he is well educated, speaks English and has a flat of his own. However, he falls in love with a nineteen-year-old dalit, an untouchable, who lives in a filthy, smelly neighbourhood outside in the slums of Bombay. There are rituals to confirm their love and union: "They soaped each other copiously, till both looked like astronauts, just back from the moon, and scrubbed every inch of each other's bodies, being partial to the dick, bums and tits" (2003: 103). They even celebrate their own wedding ceremony: "they went round the fire seven times, with Yudi saying these words and Milind repeating them: 'I promise to be your Humsafar, trust me, till death do us part.'" (107)<sup>7</sup>. By surpassing all boundaries of age, class, caste, gender, education and language, Yudi manifests his intense and true love for Milind, who also feels the same. This love undergoes different stages, passions and pleasures. We can see how Yudi becomes ill and sheds tears like a boy of four when Milind disappears. Rao also introduces Gauri, the female character who is the odd-one-out in this story or, more precisely, the hybrid one. She combines Indian and Western cultural traits: Gauri is an upcoming divorced painter who smokes cigarettes and has taken up eco-feminism. Her Indian upbringing

<sup>7</sup> The term *humsafar* can be translated as companion or loving friend.

ing, however, compels her to uphold repressed sexual prejudices and taboos, for example, that all men are naturally attracted to women. Thus, Gauri thinks that Yudi can obviously be sexually reformed and she can marry him one day. Despite the differences between Yudi and Gauri, compassion and love unites them at the end of the story and they become like brother and sister. Gauri comes to represent the new Indian middle classes with their global consumerist styles, their intellectual and professional lives who can control Hindu nationalist institutions and attempt to preserve the inexistent, disfigured or distorted image of “absolute Indianness”. By ending the story with this sentiment of brotherhood / sisterhood between the homosexual world represented by Yudi, and Gauri, the story seems to suggest that sympathy, understanding and elimination of oppressive barriers is possible.

Poverty appears to be the key aspect that overlaps biological needs and depicts them with naturalness. Throughout *The Boyfriend's* narrative, when Yudi and his lover Milind decide to make a trip to Sharavanabelagola, the reader is fascinated by the typical rural scenes of people defecating in the fields or passengers of a train looking for a place to urinate. The scene is described with absolute naturalness: evacuating is a natural action the body needs to perform, and in a poor place everybody, men and women equally, are expected to do it wherever is available. Likewise, there on the train we find sentences like: “everybody snored and farted. Indian trains were like that: they brought out the beasts in men” (2003: 131). This passage is similar to the poem “The Reading Experience”, included in the writer’s collection *Slide Show* (1992), in which the writer and protagonist is on a crowded train trying to read. He cannot do that because he feels more attracted to the life he sees outside the window:

I close the book and watch men  
defecate along the tracks.  
I salivate.  
My mind is now empty as a vacuum.  
Though my nose is full of fertile odour  
which I inhale like a gland of musk (Rao 1992: 22).

It all seems to point to striking parallelisms with Book IV of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. In Swift’s landscape of Yahoos and Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos are always connected to nastiness and filth, whereas the Houyhnhnms represent moral cleanliness and decency: “Another thing he wondered at in the Yahoos was their strange disposition to nastiness and dirt whereas there appears to be a natural love of cleanliness in all other animals” (Swift 1999: 274). Swift counterposes and interrogates the worlds of nature and culture. The Yahoos are loathsome, outrageous and primitive creatures who dig for roots to eat. They are neither savage nor tame but resist all means of domestication. Gulliver is also called a Yahoo and he realizes his resemblance with the Yahoos by the common parts of the body and their functions: “I observed in this abominable animal a perfect human figure” (Swift 1999: 238). In Rao’s *The Boyfriend*, Yudi and Milind, the gay couple, and also the writer himself, stand for the Yahoos of this story. They evoke horror and disgust in the cultural and civilized Indian mainstream, as they are outside the boundaries of a ‘rational’, ‘moral’ and legal world. This equivalence of the writer being himself a Yahoo is expressed in his poem “Self-Portrait” (1992):

I, Raj Rao, 32  
 Am a festering poet worn to the bone.  
 Lice live in my hair, mice have bitten my toes  
 I have protruding teeth, a fungoid groin.  
 I smell like a horse.  
 My nails with which I sometimes scratch my verses  
 Are grown and black and twisted out of shape.  
 There are holes in my teeth that let out slime.  
 I'm a yahoo in sex: I drink even your urine (Rao 1992: 21).

According to Charles H. Hinnant (1987), in civilized cultures governed by reason, reason is a slave to the passions and encourages vices when these passions are trapped within reason. In a highly normative culture with rigid sexual restrictions and roles the vices that Hinnant refers to can embody multiple forms like for example a secretive double life that the person has to lead owing to absolute sexual repression. Rao, like Swift, challenges the traditional schema that culture and reason are superior to nature and passions. He puts the emphasis on nature, the body, the passions of human beings to subvert and provoke; he calls himself a 'yahoo' in sex, which in contemporary language could stand for the term 'queer'. Homosexuals or queers are yahoos with respect to the moral refinement and sexual constraints of cultures like India, which still maintain puritanical Victorian laws. Besides, Swift reminds us that culture is a construction as particular traits, features, signs or principles that are considered by Gulliver and the Europeans distinctive emblems of "civilization" are equally rejected and pejoratively dismissed by the Houyhnhnms. For other critics like O'Leary (1914), Swift does not attempt to defy the dichotomy of nature versus culture but rather to highlight the essential nastiness of human nature.

O'Leary's reading of Swift defends the belief that human beings can get carried away by their nature, by their passions and thus transform themselves into evil: monsters without a rational mind. This argument is nonetheless applicable to Rao's work and his depiction of the gay microcosm in the city of BomGay. His work insists on the physicality of the body to remark that we are all living beings and therefore the same.

Man cannot forget that despite his zest for life, he is a creature that shits. He is a biological animal. But he thinks he's altogether superior to animals, and the whole notion of civilization rests on this untruth. If civilization were not a lie, the shit of Novel laureates would have been different from that of savages. It would be richer, more fertile. But it's not (Rao 1996: 74-75).

Rao expands this idea in his play "The Wisest Fool on Earth" (1996), which is a remarkable monologue set in a toilet in a Bombay skyscraper. The protagonist Jay talks to the audience who participates in the play with gestures. Jay has been trapped in this luxuriously decorated toilet by his male lover before they are about to be surprised by his lover's family. Now Jay addresses the audience with relentless intensity and seeks to provoke them, to stunningly move them. The toilet where Jay is trapped is equipped with the latest and most sophisticated technology; there is a TV, a wall-clock, a fridge, gilded mirrors, telephone showers, flickering lamps and even a library with a varied range of reading stuff. On one hand, the toilet symbolically

stands for our progressive, technological and consumerist world where Jay is supposed to have pleasure. However, he has been locked there; he feels trapped. On the other hand, the toilet is a reminder of “the five vital functions”, as the protagonist puts it, to refer to eating, drinking, fucking, shitting and sleeping:

When you attain wisdom, you will discover that after all is said and done, it's only the so-called animal functions that matter. Eating, drinking, fucking, shitting, sleeping. Everything else that you pursue is illusion. Delusion. I've realized this long ago, and that is why I've decided to tear up my university degree, and donate the only book that I possess -*Gulliver's Travels*- to the library in this toilet (Rao 1996: 86).

The expected response that follows after the previous lines comes in the form of stones hurled at the protagonist by his audience. The audience, a representation of the world, is horrified. They do not want to hear the truth that is the cause of his entrapment. Naturally, we cannot be misled by the idea that what Rao or the protagonist, Jay, claims has to do with going back to prehistoric times when people or troglodytes followed their instincts. Far from that, he invokes “wisdom” and “being evolved”, at least sufficiently evolved to be able to understand that sex or sexuality is something inherent in nature just like eating or sleeping. “I need my daily dose of sex, just as I need my food and drink”, Jay says (Rao 1996: 86). Therefore, what certainly goes against the order of nature are any kind of attempts carried out throughout history, in different forms and cultures, to control, categorize or shape human sexuality. Thus, Jay is being kept locked. Whether in the toilet or “in the closet”, he is unwillingly trapped there:

Open the door, you ugly rats. Let me reveal myself to my lover's father. Let me tell him that his son is a pervert, like everybody else here. Let me expose son to father and father to son. Let me utter the truth. The truth always scares everyone that is why I have been kept locked. My presence is a threat to people, and so they attempt to stone me, lock me up, or simply shut their windows and recede into the safe corners of their houses, where I cannot be heard. (Thumps more forcefully) For God's sake open the door. My audience is out on the street, waiting for me. I need to be reunited with them (Rao 1996: 87).

This passage reveals that the audience has gone. Nearly reaching the end of the play the audience disappears and Jay's shouting to let him out has failed. In a globalized world of progress and hi-tech there seems to be no space for communication and understanding. The audience of this play represented by intolerant Indians is afraid of Jay as he can reveal their own ‘perversions’, their own concealed worlds and double lives. Keeping the convenient standards of hypocrisy helps to maintain one's power over the other and thus to reinforce differences and hierarchies. These hierarchies can be not only of sex but also of caste or of gender. Jay's struggle does not cease. The audience has decided to go but the play does not close leaving a mere rancid taste of unpleasant realism. Though exhausted by now, Jay continues bumping at the door to be let out while he also manages to exclaim: “I cannot live without an audience” (87). I believe that as long as there is an audience, the play is possible.

The audience of any writer is naturally all his / her readers, who as protagonists participate in the performance not only having fun but also interrogating things and even hurling stones. In Rao's short story "One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City" (1995), once more the main protagonist is the huge tide of people in Bombay and its gay microcosm. The writer finds himself among the multitude surging on; he starts questioning where the throngs might be going and why they are all walking in the same direction. He feels attracted by and interested in the eroticism of the mass and begins to examine them: the ugliness of their bodies, their cracking feet, the dirt in their nails, hairy nostrils packed with snot, the collective sweet and sour sweat of the city. Then he realizes that most people are holding hands independently of their sex. Is it because of the pleasure they get by intertwining fingers? He wonders. Thus the writer confesses: "I don't know whether this act of mine could be construed as a sexual act ... but this much I know: in our city, the sheer proximity of people to each other, the closeness at which they sleep and eat and travel in buses and trains, can incite desire that would have no place in saner circumstances: a perverse, unnatural desire" (Rao 1995: 86). Briefly, I would also like to mention that his perverse and unnatural desire is also characteristic of James Joyce's fiction. Issues like masturbation, contraception, homosexuality or the idea of a third sex coexist within *Finnegans Wake*, *Ulysses* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Brown, 1985). Although it goes beyond the aim of this paper, I would briefly like to mention that we can also find some similarities between the literature by the great American poet, Walt Whitman, especially his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and Rao's concept of (homo)eroticism. The literary strategies and devices to depict the erotic realism of their worlds differ, but the common element that binds Rao and Whitman together, the (homo)-eroticism of the crowds, of common people, is always reflected in their work. That may be because Rao wrote his PhD dissertation on Whitman's work and he might have been very much influenced by his style. Although the language of Rao's work does not share Whitman's mystic or religious lyricism but rather depicts the grotesque, there seems to be a comparatively interrelation of gay common sensibilities.

In India Victorian taboos on sex and social and legal rules are still valid nowadays for a great number of people. Despite the arrival of globalization that brought in outside influences and a thorough interrogation of morality, political and literary gay writers like Rao contribute to sparking public discussion so that a gay-friendly consciousness increases and archaic laws, like Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, are suppressed. The homophobic and intolerable social stigma has never stopped Rao from elevating his voice among the cacophony of disqualifying reports of critics like Pramod K Nayar who regards his work in general, and *The Boyfriend* in particular, as "a sweaty crotch-and armpit saga" (Nayar 2003), which is full of four-letter words except for the vital ones 'love' and 'life'. Despite this political and linguistic 'incorrectness', Rao writes about common people and their personal experiences with the physical world. He conveys the union and sympathy of all men. His work also celebrates class, caste, gender and sexual egalitarianism. His utopian belief makes him conceive a world with no barriers, frontiers or systems that delimit and shape love. Contrary to the poetic mysticism that seems to envelop some descriptions of India, Rao depicts "an India", which is real, crude and decadent in the grotesque and fictitious world of BomGay. In so doing, he challenges the society of his time with his natural exposure of sexual imagery.

Another characteristic of his work is that the heroes in Rao's stories are ordinary or common men; they are the ones we find in the streets or meet everyday. In his poetry and fiction, we discover that dalits like Milind, middle class professionals, such as Yudi and Gauri, or students and policemen people his stories. The places that give shape to their lives are also linked to the writer's personal and literary landscape of BomGay. He portrays urban life and places of the Indian gay underworld. In his poetry, the city of BomGay welcomes an incredible, effervescent queer life. Thus his poems "Bombay 1":

Cars buses taxies  
Kotis panthis hijras bi's  
Beggars crows dogs cats (Rao 2005).

and "Bombay 2":

Fumes shit pav bhaji  
Skyscrapers local trains rats  
Amitabh Bachchan<sup>8</sup>

can turn into "BomGay":

Family members  
From England, America and Canada  
Visit you at Bombay  
Which they call BomGay.  
Some of them are sex tourists,  
You their postcolonial pimp  
Hungry for pounds and dollars.  
Religiously, you take them  
On a conducted tour  
That includes Gokul, Voodoo and ARK headquarters.  
But what pleases them most,  
More than even the gents toilet  
On platform number two of Dadar station (WR),  
Is Apsara theatre's steeple,  
God's own penis mightier than the sword,  
Pointing menacingly towards the sky (Merchant 1999: 100).

As the poem above suggests urban places, and in this case the city of Bombay / BomGay, welcomes diversity in the form of means of transport, "cars buses taxies" or alternative sexualities, "kotis panthis hijras bi's". However, the city also hides mul-

<sup>8</sup> Amitabh Bachchan is a popular hero of Bollywood cinema who becomes very popular in the 1960s and 70s. His films usually focus on male bonding, which is codified as same-sex desire. See, for example, Gayatri Gopinath's "Queering Bollywood: Alternative Sexualities in Popular Indian Cinema". *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol 39 n° 3-4, 2000.

Also, in "BomGay 1", the term *kotis* refers to homosexual men who are passive or penetrated in the sexual relationship, whereas those who are *panthis* are active of penetrators. These terms are colloquial for the city of Bombay / BomGay.

triple perils as it is the place for the commodification of sex: “BomGay” indicates this through the correlated image of sex tourism and the postcolonial pimp; it is also the place for sexual harassment and bribery by the police who threaten homosexuals with Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code to get what they want. Rao also refers to the police patrolling parks or other cruising places in search of men who might look homosexual. In Rao’s short story “Confessions of a Boy Lover” (1995), Siddharth, one of the protagonists, is also threatened by “the carnivores” or “hyenas”, as he calls them to refer to goondas<sup>9</sup>. This tangible realism suggests that in India being queer, that is to say, opting for any kind of alternative sexualities rather than compulsory heterosexuality, means being as oppressed and marginalized as an untouchable or a dalit can be. Thus, by seeing the self in other selves or finding similarity in difference, what Rao does is to forge a communal identity and construct a common alliance.

No doubt, Rao uses his literary devices and overt language to introduce the reader to India’s gay life. The first chapter of *The Boyfriend* is, from my point of view, the most radical as far as language is concerned. Perhaps it produces that effect because it linguistically reveals those words and actions that some want to conceal.

He had an unrestricted view of the lad’s member, which was stiff all right. He was disappointed, though, by it’s (sic) size. Where he wanted to bite into a cucumber, what was on display was a mere chilli. He did not like chillies; they did absolutely nothing for his tongue. The boy played with his chilli. On impulse, he looked over the wall, as if to check out Yudi’s vegetable. What did he possess: a cucumber, a carrot, a radish, or a lady’s finger? Yudi panicked. Although he owned quite a cucumber himself, it was not quite ready for the bazaar (Rao 2003: 7).

This passage compares the male sexual organ to different vegetables. The writer also refers to the bazaar, which seems to evoke a homoerotic medieval scene in a market place. Perhaps Rao indirectly wants to allude to the homoerotic past of India and its literature<sup>10</sup>. However, his boldness confirms contemporary times and the writer’s mood that attempts to shock the reader. The language is also connected to the gay underworld which is guided by a series of codes and rituals that serve to determine if one is straight or queer, whether gay identified or MSM (men who have sex with men). Rao tells us that when Yudi approaches the Churchgate lavatories in search of sex:

a man was blowing another to an audience of two. As soon as Yudi stepped in, everyone straightened up and returned to their respective stalls. They wanted to determine if he was a cat or a pigeon. Yudi gave them the Indian nod to indicate it was okay; he was a pigeon (2003: 3)

We are also told that the toilet is divided into two sections, the gay and the straight wing. We can assume then that queer men are perfectly aware and go there to “wank”,

<sup>9</sup> Goondas: a Hindi term that refers to hired gangs or bullies. In the context of homosexuality, sometimes the police or families themselves hire these gangs of goondas to harass or create fear in homosexuals, whether men or women.

<sup>10</sup> See Ruth Vanita’s masterpiece *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000).

“piss” or have a “dekko”: “The dick is designed to perform only one function at a time, not two; one can either wank or pee ... He was dying to exhibit his dick to anyone who wanted a dekko” (4-5). Rao also deals with the theme in his poem “Masturbation” (1992) and in his short story “Moonlight Tandoori” (1995).

It has to be highlighted that Rao is one of the pioneers in contemporary India in vindicating same-sex love legitimacy not only in literature but also in real life. He wants to rehabilitate those sexual identities, practices and feelings that are reputedly perverse and vile in India. As I have shown, his radicalism lies in his particular use of language to depict reality, which not only reveals overt manifestations of the queer world but also what society conceals as something altogether quotidian. The term ‘*yaar*’ that Rao uses in all his work has no equivalent in English. The most approximate one, according to Raj Ayyar, is the concept of ‘comrade’ and ‘comradeship’ (Ratti 1993). Comradeship involves a sentiment of universal brotherhood, of erotic love between men. It does not differentiate between masculine or feminine men but rather unites all men together with values of loyalty, complicity and strong commitment. These are the values present in the meaning of ‘*yaar*’, which has its Indian female equivalent in the term ‘*saheli*’. Thus, Rao’s characters or ‘*yaars*’ reveal their emotional urges and sexual yearnings in the fictional city of BomGay or in its real counterpart, Bombay. Some critics may describe it as “animal magnetism”, others as “a natural force like electricity” (Allen 1955: 187), yet Rao portrays the naturalness of sex and homoerotic love in times of political repression.

#### 4. Conclusion

I would like to conclude highlighting the fact that in democratic countries the treatment of alternative sexualities and identities in literature guarantees change and contributes to political and social recognition. As this study has demonstrated the artistically colorful microcosm of BomGay exposes the complexity of today’s world, which cannot be tackled by applying unidimensional global models but requires the acknowledgement of hybrid representations and plural needs. Thus, a call for consciousness of liminal identities, unconcluded cross-theories, comparative intersections, unimaginable frontiers and, above all, artistic rebellion can sensitize society towards a better understanding and respect for Human Rights.

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