

Queering the Spatial Dynamics: A Study on Tropical Queer Mobility Amidst Binary Oppositions in Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2016)

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Abstract

This article critically examines the construct of tropicality, wherein colonial powers impose socially constructed ideologies, thereby obfuscating the boundaries between reality and illusion. The tropics, consequently, become a site of Othering, wherein queerness is suppressed due to the pernicious impact of colonialism. By queering India's tropical setting, this study endeavours to bridge the prevailing gap in tropicality research, deploying 'tropical queerness' as a methodological framework to interrogate the nuanced dynamics of queer identities deeply entrenched in socio-political and traditional norms. Despite formidable challenges, narratives within the LGBTQIA+ community in tropical India exemplify resilience in exploring suppressed aspects of sexuality and gender whilst challenging pervasive stigma and stereotypes. This investigation scrutinises queer mobility, both mental and physical, through the power dynamics of socio-economic, socio-political, gender, and sexuality binaries impacted by colonial discourse. By situating Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2016) within the purview of discourse analysis, tropical India is deconstructed as an 'Orient', revealing insights into the root causes of queer mobility. Applying Edward Said's concept of latent Orientalism as 'latent tropicality', this study vividly portrays queer experiences as 'tropical otherness', particularly through the characters Yudi and Milind, whose narratives serve as a testament to the enduring impact of colonialism on queer identities in tropical India.

Keywords: Tropicality; Tropics; Tropical India; Queer Mobility; Homosexuality

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Introduction

In the contemporary academic landscape, a burgeoning fascination with tropicality has emerged in the wake of post-Orientalism, with the primary objective of excavating the intrinsic authenticity inherent to tropical regions. As research in this domain proliferates, the term 'tropicality' has undergone a semantic evolution, encompassing not only geographical significance but also connotations of 'alterity' (Lundberg et al., 2022: 2). Recent scholarly endeavours in tropical studies have transcended traditional examinations of flora and fauna, instead delving into the obscured cultural nuances marginalised by the legacy of colonialism. The tropics, denoting the geographical region situated between the Tropic of Cancer and the Equator, are distinguished by their diverse ecosystems. Historically, tropical nations have endured the imposition of colonialism, characterised by the insidious narrative of inferiority and underdevelopment, perpetuating an image of 'subalternity' and fostering a trope of primitiveness (Rahim, 1999: 1). This image of the tropics has undergone a metamorphosis over time, evolving from connotations of 'luxuriance' to 'tenebrosity' (Bhattacharya, 2012: 1).

Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatus illuminates the insidious mechanisms by which hegemonic power operates, precipitating the subconscious internalisation of dominant ideologies (Margulies, 2018: 182). Historian David Arnold draws a compelling analogy between the theory of tropicality and Edward Said's seminal work on *Orientalism* (1979), wherein the tropics are posited as analogous to the Orient, whose authentic identity has been distorted by the pernicious influence of colonial powers. The production and representation of the Orient, and its attendant meanings are regulated through the dominant knowledge structures of the West, which perpetuate a narrative of inferiority. Similarly, the tropics and Orientalism are both subject to the power dynamics of the "Other", as mediated by the dominant discourse (Clayton & Bowd, 2006: 1). By aligning these frameworks, Arnold

suggests that the tropics, akin to the Orient, warrant examination within a nuanced conceptual framework that transcends their geographical features, thereby giving rise to diverse perspectives, including interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches, towards understanding tropicality.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a luminary of structuralist thought, posits that the symbiotic relationship between the sign and signifier plays a paramount role in the ascription of meaning to linguistic and visual entities, with the dialectical interplay between the sign and signified serving as the paradigmatic framework for the construction of meaning (Dewanti, 2023: 3). Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss, another éminence grise of structuralist theory, contends that binary oppositions constitute the foundational axis upon which mythological meaning is constructed, whilst simultaneously critiquing the dichotomous nature of these oppositions as reductive and simplistic (Dundes, 1997: 40). The theory of binary opposition by Lévi-Strauss has become a cornerstone of interdisciplinary analysis, with 'mythemes' conceptualised as the fundamental units of mythological narrative, analogous to the binary oppositions that undergird them (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). This study situates mythemes within the context of ideological discourse, examining the ways in which ideas are manipulated, disseminated, and reified as truths, particularly in discussions surrounding sexuality and the human condition. Furthermore, the study undertakes a critical examination of the manipulation of truth through the lens of Edward Said's concepts of latent and manifest orientalism, drawing upon psychoanalytic theory to illuminate how unconscious ideologies regarding the Orient are inscribed upon the visible, tangible entity of manifest orientalism (Donzé-Magnier, 2017: 4).

Edward Said's concept of latent orientalism is recontextualised herein as 'latent tropicality', denoting an insidious ideological framework that perpetuates ossified notions regarding gender and sexuality, culminating in the manipulation of truth within tropical regions. The venerable

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche posits that truth is inherently subjective and susceptible to multiple interpretations, thereby underscoring the notion that ideologies have become entrenched as truths, precipitating a loss of originary identity amongst individuals in tropical regions, with perilous consequences (Frankfurter & McGoun, 1999: 2). This study embraces tropicality by deploying 'queerness' as a critical methodology, further encapsulating tropicality through a critical examination of Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2016) as an exemplar of 'counterfactual writing', wherein Rao constructs a queer spatiality and futurity through his narrative, thereby subverting dominant discourses.

Literature Review

The literature review is triangulated into three distinct sections. Firstly, it elucidates the proposition of 'queering the tropics' as a critical methodology, encompassing a plethora of tropical approaches to deconstruct queerness as an inherent entity. The second section undertakes a critical examination of the representation of queerness in Indian literature, highlighting the erstwhile discouragement of queer narratives and the consequent paucity of literature voicing the concerns of the queer community. The final section of the literature review explores the scholarly view towards Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2016).

'Queering the tropics' as a methodology

Tropical literature's initial focus on the natural world expanded to examine queer discrimination through evolving critical perspectives. This inquiry transcended its scope by incorporating phenomenological aspects and diverse approaches, drawing parallels with Orientalism. The tropics are now conceptualised beyond geography, with queer theory examining the eroticised nature of tropical regions and its subversion by colonial powers. A recent study, "Queering the Tropics" by Benitez et al. (2024) utilises queerness as a methodology to excavate queer tropicality's dimensions, proposing a multifaceted realm of queer tropicality.

Queer Ecology

Queer Ecology, a subsidiary of "queering the Tropics", critically examines the tropics' eroticised ontology, subverting Western philosophical hegemony that construes queer as aberrational. This shift unveils the "erotic geographies" of the tropics, recontextualising queerness as naturalised, challenging heteronormative ecology paradigms. Studies like "Queering Tropical Heritage" by Rushdianto et al. (2024) and "Queering Tropical Nature" (Ghosal & Ghosal, 2024) employ interdisciplinary methodologies, synthesising queer ecology, Derridean deconstruction, and Butler's gender performativity, to excavate tropical queerness and decolonise hetero-ecologies. The latter adopts 'decolonial queer ecology' to deconstruct colonial heteronormativity, foregrounding the deterritorialisation of Adivasi sexuality in *My Father's Garden*.

Cultural Tropicality

Tropicality, as a conceptual paradigm, examines the tropics as a culturally rich and ritually diverse entity, with mythologies and folk cultures garnering significant scholarly attention. Indian mythologies, such as in "Küttāṅṭavar's Festivals" (Mukherjee, 2024), demonstrate a liminal openness towards sexuality, critically exploring homosexuality in mythological narratives. This study centres on the Küttāṅṭavar festival, investigating the deity's association with Aravan in Tamil culture and 'queers' the tropical elements in the Mahabharata through Aravan's tale, subverting the heteronormative paradigm. By examining tropicality, transsexuality, and mythology intersections, this study contributes to the field of cultural tropicality, highlighting complex dynamics of sexuality, culture, and identity in tropical contexts.

Decolonisation through 'Queering'

Decolonisation involves subverting constructed identities imposed by imperial powers and reclaiming original identities and epistemologies. In tropical Africa, where colonial vestiges persist, *Queering Tropical African Heteronormativity* (Macheso, 2024) interrogates African society's heteronormative comportment, a legacy of British colonialism. Analysing *The Death of Vivek Oji* as

“counterfactual writing”, this study unveils “alternatives to reality” (Macheso, 2024) that destabilise dominant discourse. Expanding the ‘Queering the Tropics’ methodology, this study deploys ‘latent tropicality’ as a queering methodology, exploring psychoanalytic dimensions of tropical queerness and contributing to a nuanced understanding of tropical subjectivities.

Review of Indian Queer Literature

Indian queer literature predates Independence, despite criminalisation. Courageous writers defied norms, while scholars excavated queer histories through nuanced analyses. Pandey Sharma’s *Chocolate* (2009) subverted heteronormative representations with gay undertones (Knight, 2010). Ismat Chughtai’s *The Quilt* (2011) boldly portrayed a lesbian relationship, facing obscenity charges due to its transgressive content (Minault, 1996). Despite government disapproval and stigma, Chughtai believed her candid exploration merited recognition.

Suryakant Tripathi Nirala’s *Kulli Bhat* (2021) confronts India’s enduring taboos: caste and homosexuality (Gupta, 2016). Shakuntala Devi’s *The World of Homosexuals* (1977) explores homosexuality in post-independent India, featuring insightful interviews (Ansari, 2018). Vijay Tendulkar’s *Mitrachi Goshta* (2001), Mahesh Dattani’s plays (2000), and Suniti Namjoshi’s advocacy works challenge sexual taboos (2013). “Same-Sex Love in India” (Vanitha & Kidwai, 2021) documents homosexuality’s historical presence. Firdaus Kanga’s *Trying to Grow* (2013) poignantly captures the struggles of disabled and homosexual individuals (To be gay and feel your heart break, 2012). Works like Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* (2002), Geetanjali Shree’s *Tirohit* (2007), and Rajkamal Chaudhary’s *Machali Mari Hui* (2019) portray same-sex relationships among married women, underscoring Indian queer experiences’ complexity (Chanana, 2010).

In India, queer experiences were historically silenced and excluded from public discourse and publication. Early literature on queer culture focused on heteronormative ideologies’

hegemony, neglecting complex psychological dimensions of queer subjectivities. This resulted in a significant lacuna in narrative representations of queer lives, relegating queer psychological elements to the periphery.

Literature Review on Raja Rao’s *The Boyfriend* (2016)

Raja Rao’s *The Boyfriend* (2016) has been extensively studied for its queer motifs, illuminating India’s homophobic attitudes and heteronormativity (Bakshi, 2017; Bala & Gupta, 2022; Bandu, 2018). Scholars have scrutinised the interplay of communal tensions, including power dynamics and sexual inclinations, through the characters Yudi and Milind, a homosexual couple (Ross, 2014). The novel captures the fear and secrecy surrounding their gay identities (Patil, 2015). Furthermore, analyses have explored the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity through Yudi, Milind, and Gauri, with Gauri’s role challenging dominant norms (Kadam, 2016).

Inquiries into spatiality and identity reveal how societal constructs limit LGBTQIA+ individuals’ authentic expression. The Churchgate loo in the novel exemplifies this, highlighting public-private space tensions (Holtkamp, 2016). This marginalisation creates a distinct gay subculture in Indian cities, with unique spatialities and subjectivities (Das, 2021; King, 2012). Rigid gender norms create unrealistic expectations, entrapping Yudi and Milind in a dialectical tension (Tiwari, 2013). Arroyo’s analysis praises Rao’s authentic portrayal of India’s complexities (Arroyo, 2018), while Modi’s comparative study explores queer identity and spatiality (Modi, 2020).

The extant literature on Raja Rao’s *The Boyfriend* (2016) has hitherto privileged a paradigmatic focus on queer struggles, identity, and communal tension, whilst neglecting a nuanced examination of the psychological trajectories of Yudi and Milind. This study seeks to redress this epistemological lacuna by mobilising the novel as a decolonial apparatus to interrogate the complex dialectics of physical and psychological oscillation that precipitate queer mobility. By operationalising ‘tropical queerness’ as a methodological heuristic, this analysis

endeavours to excavate the intersectional dynamics between queer embodiment, spatiality, and identity, thereby illuminating the intricate ways in which Yudi and Milind negotiate their queer subjectivities and navigate the complexities of queer becoming.

Methodology

This study employs Narrative Discourse Analysis as a qualitative methodological framework to examine the power dynamics inherent in Raja Rao's narrative, thereby interrogating the complex interplay between queerness, identity, and societal norms. By utilising the contemporary methodology of 'Queering the Tropics,' this study, as discussed above undertakes a critical analysis of the queer narratives in *The Boyfriend* (2016), with a particular focus on 'Latent Tropicality' as a lens to deconstruct the power dynamics that perpetuate heteronormativity. Through this analytical framework, the research elucidates the psychological oscillations that precipitate queer mobility, as exemplified by the characters Yudi and Milind, who are entrapped in societal power dynamics. Furthermore, this study explores how 'Latent Tropicality' reveals the intricate ways in which queerness is spatially and culturally constructed, highlighting the tensions between normative and non-normative identities. Additionally, the analysis examines how the novel's narrative strategies, such as the use of tropical settings and queer characters, subvert dominant discourses and create a counter-narrative that challenges the prevailing binaries in Indian society. By applying the theoretical construct of 'Latent Tropicality,' this study offers a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between power, identity, and queerness, thereby contributing to the burgeoning field of queer tropical studies.

Queer Mobility

Judith Butler's seminal work, *Gender Trouble* (2006), underscores the profound impact of cultural norms on gender and sexuality, arguing that societal expectations surrounding sexuality curtail individual autonomy. Butler's critique specifically highlights the enforcement of heterosexuality as the norm, thereby

marginalising homosexual relationships and perpetuating heteronormativity. Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1965), further elucidates the power dynamics between genders, positing that gender identity is a social construct rather than an inherent trait (Beauvoir, 1965: 14). This construct perpetuates cultural pressures, evident in the marginalisation of homosexuals, who are deemed a threat to heteronormative structures. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1990) examines societal perceptions of homosexuality, categorising homosexual bodies as 'unnatural' and subject to political manipulation. Foucault's exploration extends to the politicisation of the body, as elucidated in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, where he posits that the constructed body serves as a political entity (Bala & Gupta, 2022: 104). The imposition of binaries within tropical contexts results in the queer community being relegated to the status of 'Other', prompting queer mobility. While traditionally associated with migration, the concept of mobility has expanded within the social sciences, gaining prominence in recent decades. Glăveanu (2020) posits that physical mobility is inextricably linked with the mind, which is altered by cultural entities (Glăveanu, 2020: 188).

The dialectical relationship between social inclusivity and mobility is underscored by the notion that the former precipitates the latter, thereby perpetuating a paradigm predicated on socially constructed ideologies, as mentioned by Weintrob et al. (2021: 776). The LGBTQIA+ community, marginalised by the colonial reconstruction of sexual norms, seeks solace in mobility, endeavouring to authenticate their identities in private spheres, thereby subverting the hegemonic discourse that perpetuates their marginalisation. Mobility, in this context, transcends mere physical movement, symbolising a liminal transition between heteronormative societal expectations and homosexual self-expression, thereby facilitating a nuanced navigation of the complexities inherent in queer identity. Western ideologies impose a sense of alterity upon the Queer community in tropical regions, compelling them

to negotiate a dichotomous existence, wherein they conceal their authentic selves in public whilst embracing their true identities in private. This mental oscillation between heterosexuality and homosexuality reflects the internal strife occasioned by societal dichotomies, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of queer subjectivities. As Glăveanu (2020) posits, individuals occupy multiple social roles and symbolic positions, navigating between them as dictated by social context and personal imagination, thereby highlighting the complexities inherent in identity formation (Glăveanu, 2020: 186). This research critically examines the prevailing binaries within tropical India, elucidating their role in marginalising tropical queers and precipitating queer mobility, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between identity, mobility, and social inclusivity.

Tropical Queer India and Manipulation of Sexual Truth

Tropical India presents a paradox where fluid sexuality coexists with entrenched gender binaries, perpetuating a complex dialectic between tradition and modernity. Despite progress, sexuality remains ensnared in stereotypes within tropical Indian families, particularly in rural settings, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of queer subjectivities (Bedi, 2022). However, historical excavation reveals India's culturally rich past, characterised by openness toward sexuality, untethered by societal taboos (Chakraborty & Thakurata, 2013: 255). Indian literature, art, and temples adorned with erotic sculptures, such as Khajuraho and Puri, serve as reminders of India's historical embrace of sexual diversity and awareness, highlighting the nation's cultural heritage (Krishan, 1972: 331).

Within Khajuraho's precincts, sculptures celebrate nudity with artistry, transcending temporal boundaries and showcasing a nuanced understanding of human sexuality (Dey, 2023). The Kamasutra, authored by Vatsyayana in the third century CE, remains the world's oldest treatise on sexuality, intimacy, and power dynamics, influencing advanced societies and

cementing its status within the canon of erotic literature (Doniger, 2002: 126). Tropical Indian mythologies and epics, such as the Mahabharata, interweave themes of homosexuality into their narratives, exemplifying a nuanced understanding of queer subjectivities and subverting the hegemonic discourse that has traditionally sought to marginalise non-normative sexualities (Know why Arjuna's son Aravan, 2018). However, the introduction of Section 377 in 1861 by Lord Macaulay marked a significant turning point, importing Victorian values and embedding the notion of homosexuality as an unnatural act, thereby instantiating a regime of heteronormativity with far-reaching consequences for queer subjects (Misra, 2009: 21).

Section 377 codifies a heteronormative paradigm, pathologising non-normative sexualities by deeming "carnal intercourse" contrary to nature punishable by imprisonment (SC decriminalises Section 377, 2018). The 1998 exhibition of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996) in tropical India sparked brutal attacks by Shiv Sainiks, who targeted theatres in Bombay and Delhi, vandalising property and halting the film's exhibition. Esteemed writers, artists, and filmmakers protested, but Meena Kulkarni of Shiv Sena's women's wing argued that lesbian relationships would undermine reproduction and marriage, instantiating a patriarchal discourse marginalising non-normative sexualities (Anand, 2015). Jyotsna Kapur observed that India's reconstruction of sexuality reflects a fascist attitude, where the state regulates and controls citizens' bodies, particularly those in non-normative subject positions (Kapur, 2006: 336).

The Supreme Court's 2018 decision to invalidate Section 377 marked a watershed moment, heralding legal recognition for homosexuality and enhanced respect for the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly in urban areas, despite residual stigma in rural regions (SC decriminalises Section 377, 2018). This decision signified tropical India's decolonial shift, challenging colonial influences on sexuality and

subverting hegemonic discourse that marginalised non-normative sexualities. However, political factions, including Subramanian Swamy, opposed the decision, pathologising homosexuality as a “genetic flaw” and attributing it to Western influence, perpetuating harmful societal norms and heteronormativity (The Quint, 2018). Swamy’s rhetoric underscores how Western colonisation obscured tropical and Oriental truths, instantiating epistemic violence that erases non-normative sexualities. Despite decolonisation strides, homosexuality remains vilified, highlighting the need for nuanced understanding of queer subjectivities and complex dialectics of desire and identity.

Raja Rao and *The Boyfriend* (2016)

Acclaimed for his literary virtuosity, Raja Rao unapologetically affirms his identity as an openly gay writer, one among the other Indian literary writers who voiced for the queer community. Hailing from Mumbai, his oeuvre probes the intricate nuances of India’s gay subculture with unflinching candour, fervently advocating for LGBTQIA+ emancipation and challenging the hegemonic discourse that has historically marginalised non-normative sexualities. Despite encountering adversity and opprobrium, Rao fearlessly articulates his queer perspectives as a Professor at the University of Pune, embodying remarkable fortitude in the face of censure. In a society deeply entrenched in traditional values and heteronormative ideologies, his unwavering acceptance of his sexual identity stands as a beacon of inspiration, reflecting unalloyed pride and authenticity. Through his writing and pedagogy, Rao instantiates a counter-narrative that seeks to subvert the dominant paradigm, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and equitable cultural landscape.

An elderly lady who raised her hand got up and said, but why do you call yourself queer it's such

a funny word, it means you are strange, and you don't look strange and odd to me. And I said mam that exactly is, and what we have done is we taken a word, a term of abuse, we appropriate the word which was used to derogate us, and we given it new meaning we invested it new meaning, and we made it a word of empowerment we made it our weapon with which we are fighting (TEDx Talks, 2019).

Raja Rao’s empowering beliefs resonate throughout his writings, constructing a dynamic realm of queerness. His stories explore the suppressed anguish of homosexuality, challenging traditional standards and fostering a supportive environment for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Binaries Prevailing in the Tropics

Set against the backdrop of pre-decriminalisation in Bombay, *The Boyfriend* (2016) lays bare the clandestine world of homosexual relationships in India, confronting societal taboos and the imperative of secrecy that necessitates the concealment of one's true identity. The narrative delineates the complex dialectic between Yudi and Milind, who outwardly disguise their homosexuality, yet assume the roles of a couple in private, thereby instantiating a duplicitous existence that underscores the pernicious effects of heteronormative ideologies. Throughout the narrative, Yudi and Milind are portrayed as perpetually seeking spatial and emotional mobility to freely express their affection for one another, unencumbered by the suffocating strictures of societal expectations. This poignant portrayal serves as a powerful indictment of the discriminatory norms that have historically marginalised non-normative sexualities, underscoring the need for a more inclusive and accepting cultural landscape.

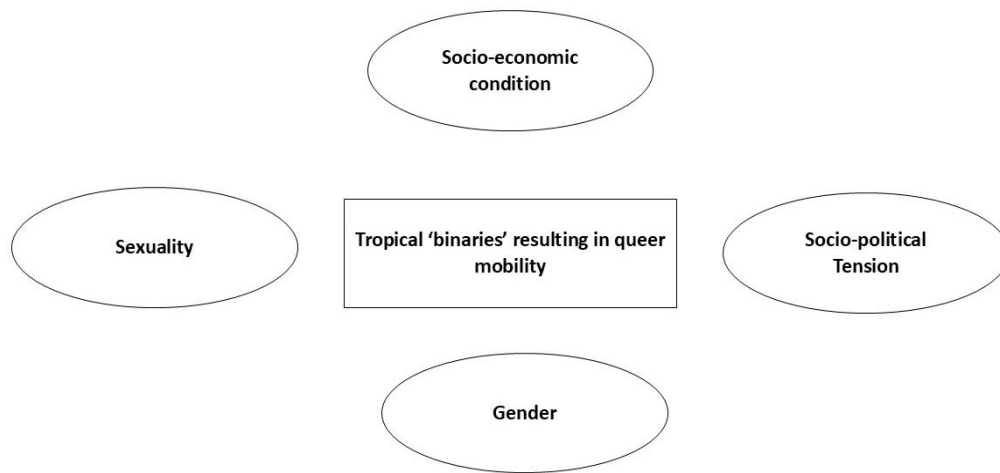


Figure 1: Tropical Binaries

Source: Created by the Authors

Socio-Economic Condition in Tropical India

Societal pressures significantly influence various realms, including culture, politics, economy, religion, gender, and sexuality, highlighting the complex interplay between these domains. Karl Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto posits that history is connected to class struggle, where group dichotomies derive significance from ongoing class struggles (Engels & Marx, 2015: 482). Socioeconomic status (SES) represents an individual's economic and social standing, underscoring inequality within the social structure and disparities in resource access (Villalba, 2014: 6210). Following colonisation, class struggles in tropical regions have intensified, exacerbating social and economic disparities as colonisers imposed their features on colonised societies (Acemoglu, 2017). This has created a complex web of power dynamics, where dominant groups maintain hegemony over marginalised groups, perpetuating a cycle of oppression.

When individuals face subsistence challenges due to classism, their struggles are intensified by the intersectionality of being queer and economically disadvantaged, compounding their suffering through a synergistic marginalisation. The queer community's tribulations are multifaceted, dominated by hegemonic norms of gender, race, class, and sex, perpetuating a matrix of oppression characterised by complex

power dynamics (Judge, 2021: 126). These entrenched ideologies, based on rigid binaries and hierarchies, marginalise and minoritise queer individuals, instantiating a paradigm of exclusion and discrimination that highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of their experiences.

An examination of the class disparity in *The Boyfriend* (2016) is undertaken through a tropical perspective, focusing on the protagonists Yudi and Milind, whose disparate socio-economic backgrounds serve as a paradigmatic illustration of the class divisions prevalent in Indian society. Yudi, a journalist, notwithstanding his non-elite birth, possesses the requisite financial means to sustain himself independently and resides in his own domicile, exemplifying a semblance of upward mobility. In stark contrast, Milind, hailing from the lower echelons of society, inhabits a joint family residence and bears the onerous responsibility of providing for the entire household, underscoring the precarious nature of his economic existence. Furthermore, the dichotomy in literacy levels between Yudi and Milind serves as a corollary to their respective social classes, with Milind's tenuous grasp of his educational pedigree - he conjectures his highest level of education to be ninth or tenth standard, though he cannot recall with certainty (Rao, 2016: 17) - serving as a poignant testament to

the enduring impact of socio-economic disadvantage on educational attainment.

Milind, a youthful individual seeking employment, declares his willingness to assume a servile role, highlighting his educational deficiencies and desperation for work. Upon seeing Yudi's affluent neighbourhood, Milind remarks on its high-class status, revealing his unfamiliarity with such surroundings (Rao, 2016: 12). Yudi, uncomfortable, interprets this as a potential request for financial assistance, leading to apprehension. To distance himself from perceived high-class society, Yudi asserts his residence in Nalla Sopara, signifying his middle-class status (Rao, 2016: 13). As the conversation shifts away from wealth, Yudi feels relief. However, the tension from class inequality fuels Yudi's fear of Milind requesting financial help. Moreover, Yudi's habit of blindfolding partners when bringing them home reflects the pernicious impact of socio-economic tensions on their relationship, perpetuated by societal beliefs that discriminate based on class.

He fished out a handkerchief from his pocket. Rolling it into a neat rectangular strip, he brought it to the boy's eyes. 'What are you doing?' the boy yelled. 'Blindfolding you,' Yudi replied calmly. 'Only as a precaution. I always do it to my lovers. The idea is that they shouldn't know what building I live in. What if they came back tomorrow to blackmail me?' (Rao, 2016: 13).

Milind's appearance and quest for a servile role spark Yudi's financial concerns, instantiating class-based mistrust. As marginalised gay individuals, their ambiguous social position is complicated by mutual doubt from class tensions, perpetuating a cycle of suspicion. Milind's interest in Yudi is motivated by his income and age, evoking a paternal dynamic highlighting the interplay between economic security and emotional connection. Despite initial reservations, Yudi is drawn to Milind, subverting his apprehensions. Milind's experiences of discrimination, including an incident at the Taj Hotel (Rao, 2016: 65), and his need to conceal his homosexuality to safeguard

his job security (Rao, 2016: 51), underscore the pernicious impact of heteronormative ideologies and entrenched classism on queer mobility.

Socio-Political Influence

Sociopolitics denotes the power discourse that exercises hegemony over society, perpetuating a complex web of control and dominance (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2015: 5). This discourse enables those in power to manipulate ideologies and maintain ascendancy. Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2016) is set against the backdrop of the 1992 religious riots sparked by the Babri Masjid demolition, which disproportionately affected queer individuals like Yudi and Milind. Due to this political unrest, people who identify themselves as queer were not able to wander across the streets freely, as they were suspected in every possible way, even if being innocent. "The post-Babri riots made the police vigilant. There were reports of gays being thrashed and thrown into the lock-up when they were found loitering in the maidan after sunset" (Rao, 2016: 36). Jenkins notes that society is characterised by perpetual conflict, with one group struggling for supremacy against another (Jenkins, 1981: 81). The riots highlighted the calamitous consequences of humanity's failure to uphold empathy and mutual respect. Sharma argues that the caste system necessitates reconceptualisation, as it has evolved into a pernicious power structure perpetuating inequality and social stratification (Sharma, 2012: 245).

In Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2016), Milind expresses trepidation about being branded an 'untouchable', highlighting the pernicious impact of caste-based discrimination on relationships. He cautions Yudi about his social position, based on caste affiliation. He proudly declares his adherence to Buddhism, soliciting Yudi's acceptance (Rao, 2016: 51). Yudi, an egalitarian journalist, opposes discrimination, but Milind fears he may distance himself upon discovering his communal background, exemplifying the belief in pollution associated with interactions with lower castes. Kak (1993) corroborates this, positing that the purity-impurity principle maintains separation within

the caste system, perpetuating social stratification (Kak, 1993: 118). Milind reveals his identity to test Yudi's resolve, proposing he consumes his *jootha* (leftover food), a gesture laden with symbolic significance in caste-based interactions.

'Homos are no different from Bhangis. Both are Untouchables. So why should I have a problem eating your jootha?' 'But you are a Brahman, aren't you?' 'No, I am a homosexual. Gay by caste. Gay by religion.' 'I don't understand what you are saying.' 'What I am saying is that homosexuals have no caste or religion. They have only their homosexuality.' 'How can that be?' 'That's how it is. Straight people are Brahmans, gays Shudras. So you see, both you and I are Shudras. That's why we are best friends. (Rao, 2016: 55)

Within societal frameworks, homosexuals frequently find themselves ostracised from religious and caste affiliations and relegated to the status of societal pariahs. Yudi propounds a poignant analogy, likening heterosexuals to the privileged Brahmins, whilst equating gays to the marginalised Shudras, thereby illuminating the pervasive sexual prejudices akin to caste-based discrimination prevalent in tropical India. The aftermath of the Babri riot in Bombay, witnessed the arrest and torture of homosexuals (Rao, 2016: 36), exemplifying the deleterious consequences of religious unrest, wherein individuals identifying as homosexuals have fallen prey to arbitrary arrests and mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement personnel, who subject them to incarceration without due cause, accompanied by sexual abuse. Milind, erroneously apprehended under suspicion of terrorism, finds himself subjected to such egregious injustice. Upon Yudi's intervention to aid him, he faces ridicule and scorn on account of his sexual orientation (Rao, 2016: 58). The persistent socio-political turmoil and experiences of ostracism and marginalisation within their own milieu precipitate a state of 'queer mobility' amongst affected individuals, characterised by a complex interplay of displacement, exclusion, and resistance.

Entanglement of Gender and Sexuality

The American Psychological Association (APA) highlights the limitations of binary gender categorisations, noting that gender assigned at birth may not align with an individual's self-identified sex (Vinney, 2023: 1). The APA advocates for a self-oriented approach, transcending fixed binaries. In India, deeply ingrained gender dichotomies perpetuate the misconception that only conventional male and female identities are legitimate, marginalising the queer community and valorising heterosexuality as the norm. This perpetuates a heteronormative paradigm, relegating non-conforming individuals to the periphery, a legacy of colonial imposition.

In Raja Rao's narrative, Milind embodies heteronormative conformity, grappling with his clandestine gay identity. He conceals his authentic self, adopting a façade of heterosexual conformity to meet societal expectations, highlighting the absence of comprehensive sexual education in tropical India, which suppresses sexual identities (Rao, 2016: 56). Milind's masquerade sows doubt in Yudi's mind, precipitating a trust crisis in their relationship. Yudi's affection is met with emotional detachment due to Milind's lack of romantic experience, shaped by his tumultuous familial life and paternal absence. Yudi doubts Milind's sexuality, questioning his genuineness as a homosexual, as Milind's thoughts betray a lingering heteronormative influence due to his never having been in a relationship with a woman.

Yudi's uncertainty about Milind's sexual orientation stemmed from a lack of comprehension, complicated by Milind's frequent rumination on impregnating a woman, a behaviour ingrained in tropical Indian families where procreation and heterosexual unions are paramount. This dichotomy intrigued Yudi, as Milind's preoccupation with procreation underscored the societal primacy of heterosexual marriages, exemplified in Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2016). When asked about his sexual identity, Milind's response revealed uncertainty and ignorance of homosexuality as a

complex interplay of emotions, instead believing in a rigid binary division of sexuality into male and female categories, highlighting the pervasive influence of binary norms in tropical Indian society, which perpetuate a heteronormative paradigm.

Yudi cares and loves Milind, but the latter is allergic towards the queer community due to the stereotypes constructed on sexuality, and it is also evident in their conversation. Yudi's attempts to discuss LGBTQIA+ themed magazines, bars, or commercials are met with Milind's discomfort, aversion, and feigned ignorance. Milind's reluctance to engage with these discussions, dismissing them as 'rubbish', betrays his hesitance to embrace a gay identity, likely influenced by traditional Indian beliefs perpetuating heteronormative norms (Rao, 2016: 57). While Yudi sees their relationship as a partnership, Milind views Yudi as a surrogate paternal figure, reinforcing Indian societal stereotypes. Milind maintains a public distance from Yudi to avoid scrutiny, underscoring the influence of heteronormative expectations.

Notwithstanding Yudi's endeavours to enlighten him, Milind remains decidedly sceptical regarding the concept of homosexuality, struggling to comprehend the notion of a *swayamvar*¹ specifically designed for gay individuals, a concept entirely novel and alien to him. He dismisses such advertisements as spurious and refuses to entertain the possibility of their legitimacy, thereby revealing his entrenched conventional mindset and dearth of understanding about sexuality. The word 'pregnant' serves as a poignant reminder of Gauri², underscoring the heterogeneous

influences that have shaped Milind's perceptions (Rao, 2016: 73). While he eschews public acknowledgment of his homosexuality, Milind derives solace from being the object of Yudi's affection, despite his internalised reservations and latent conflicts, which betray a profound ambivalence regarding his sexual identity.

Milind's traditional upbringing has instilled in him a conviction that only heterosexual unions are acceptable, rendering him intransigent to alternative sexual orientations. When Yudi attempts to contact his family, Milind reacts with anger, fearing suspicions about his own sexual orientation may compromise his heteronormative facade. Yudi's visit to Milind's residence provokes ire, as Milind fears his parents may doubt his masculinity, potentially labelling him a *chhakka* (Rao, 2016: 128), a pejorative term for effeminacy. Consequently, Milind terminates the relationship and conforms to societal expectations by marrying a woman, prioritising heteronormative matrimony.

Milind believes marriage should conform to the conventional man-woman paradigm; a notion deeply entrenched in traditional Indian society where same-sex unions are deemed taboo. Despite being homosexual, Milind enters a heterosexual marriage to Leela due to societal expectations, criminalisation of homosexuality, and family disapproval. After marriage, Milind ponders whether virginity extends to homosexual encounters but concludes, after introspection, that he still considers himself a virgin, linking virginity to heterosexuality. This underscores the entrenched nature of Milind's beliefs, perpetuating the heteronormative

¹ *Swayamvar*, an ancient Indian practice, allowed women to choose their husbands from a gathering of eligible suitors. Originating in the Vedic period, *Swayamvar* is mentioned in epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. It denotes autonomy and self-selection.

² Gauri, a divorcee and talented painter, met Yudi when he agreed to review her exhibition. Unaware of Yudi's queer identity, she found herself deeply drawn to him, her affections growing with each passing encounter. Despite Yudi's deliberate distance, Gauri continued cultivating a connection, and her warmth and kindness are a testament to her genuine nature. However, discovering Yudi's

relationship with Milind shook Gauri to her core. Though hurt, she prioritised Yudi's well-being, demonstrating remarkable empathy and selflessness. When Milind faced legal troubles and job loss, Gauri intervened, leveraging her NGO network to facilitate his recovery. Gauri's unwavering dedication to Yudi, despite his disregard, spoke volumes about her capacity for love and compassion. When Milind departed, Gauri provided emotional solace and care to Yudi; her actions were a poignant reflection of her enduring bond with him.

notion that virginity is solely associated with heterosexual experiences.

When Milind asked Leela if she was a virgin, and she returned the question with compliments. Milind was in a fix. Did men who slept with men lose their virginity, or was virginity merely a thing

The persistent disparity between gender and sexuality compels individuals to conceal their authentic selves in favour of societal expectations. The perpetual entanglement between gender and sexuality makes them hide their 'real' for the 'reality'. In public, they feign heterosexuality, deeming it socially acceptable, while seeking privacy to express their true identities.

Psychological Entrapment and Queer Mobility

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

During the era of Section 377, individuals with same-sex desires faced profound shame and trepidation in disclosing their orientation, necessitating clandestine rendezvous in public lavatories and parks. This struggle of hiding in the closet is depicted in the inaugural scene of "Gentleman" unfolds with illicit encounters among men in a public lavatory, a space partitioned to preclude assaults by

between men and women? He wasn't sure. After pondering the question for a whole week, he decided he was a virgin and said so to Leela. To his way of thinking, then, all that he had done at the A.K. Modelling Agency hadn't killed his virginity. Nor had his affair with Yudi. (Rao, 2016: 135)

heterosexuals. The stereotype of homosexuals seeking solely sexual encounters has perpetuated past aggressions, persisting even after decriminalisation. Within the men's washroom, factors like appearances, age, caste, or religion exerted minimal influence, but beyond, individuals from diverse backgrounds face marginalisation, relegated to 'untouchable' status within societal hierarchies. This dichotomy underscores the complex interplay between queer identity, spatiality, and social stratification in India.

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

The Churchgate loo has two sections. By convention one of them is the gay wing, the other the straight. The hetero wing of course has a better supply of mainstream men, but one dare not cruise in that area for fear of being bashed up. The gay wing gets nice guys only intermittently. As a college student, Yudi often felt like spending the whole day inside the loo to see what it yielded. But that was possible only in theory. There were loo attendants who knew what went on inside; some of them were on the payroll of the cops. They looked at people who

hung around in the loo with a great deal of suspicion (Rao, 2016: 10).

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

This underscores the precarious and marginalised position of the queer community in tropical India, where their voices are frequently disregarded and relegated to the periphery. Yudi's partners, who acquiesce to his proposals with trepidation, are cognisant of the potential repercussions of public exposure, including societal ostracism and ignominy, and thus refrain from displaying any affection in public settings, lest they incur the wrath of a heteronormative society. Moreover, Milind, who conceals his true identity beneath the alias 'Kishore', harbours a deep-seated fear that Yudi's profession as a journalist could precipitate the exposure of his homosexuality, a prospect laden with societal disgrace and potentially calamitous consequences, thereby highlighting the pervasive culture of fear and secrecy that pervades the lives of queer individuals in India.

In crowded spaces, individuals conceal their sexual identity by adopting a heterosexual guise with their partners, navigating queer mobility's complexities. Yudi's search for Milind is thwarted by a fabricated address, underscoring the clandestine nature of homosexual relationships in tropical India. Yudi's yearning for

genuine connections is consistently thwarted as partners depart due to societal pressures rooted in heteronormativity, mirroring Milind's actions. Yudi labels homosexual relationships in tropical India as 'Jekyll-and-Hyde', existing solely in private spheres, exemplifying queer mobility's foundation of falsehoods. Rao astutely observes, "[L]ies were what thieves spoke; gay love in India thrived on lies" (Rao, 2016: 30), highlighting the pervasive culture of deception underscoring queer relationships in India.

In the fifth chapter, titled 'Mate House,' Raja Rao illustrates queer mobility and the establishment of a queer space. This space is Yudi's home, where he brings his partners to spend time without arousing suspicion. Milind and Yudi intend to reside together there for a week, culminating in their marriage ceremony. In the context of tropical Indian culture, marriage holds sacred significance, yet queer weddings are viewed as taboo. Yudi and Milind adhere to traditional tropical Indian customs in their wedding ceremony. Milind and Yudi stage their secret marriage in Yudi's apartment. Milind, later due to social pressure, marries Leela.

He even wrote out a wedding card: Mr and Mrs Maha-Dick request the pleasure of your company at the wedding of their son MILIND with YUDI, son of the Old Lady of Pherwani Mansion, on Thursday, 25 November, at Mate House, Nalla Sopara, Bombay.

They lit a fire in the fucking room, and were about to go round it seven times, He fished out a chiffon sari that his mother had once left behind, draped himself in it, and became the bride. Milind made him up with Vicco Turmeric paste, bindi, kajal, nail-polish. Put sindoor in his maang. Tied the pallu of the sari to his own jabba. 'I promise to be your humsafar, trust me, till death do us apart.' Yudi set his automatic camera to click the historic event, and they went around the fire again, this time for the camera. Milind, though, wasn't as keen as Yudi that their wedding be photographed. He wasn't afraid of blackmail (Rao, 2016: 70).

This illustrates Yudi's yearning to hold his beloved's hand, a desire that remains unfulfilled. This marriage symbolises the emotional journey

of the queer couple. They went for a trip to Shravanabelagola, the mention of the naked statue of Lord Gometeshwara at Shravanabelagola symbolises the longing to liberate oneself from the suppression of homosexual emotions. During their week together, they find solace in each other's company, free from societal judgment. Similar to the statue, they aspire to embrace their sexual identity openly.

Milind's economic precariousness and familial constraints on homosexuality culminate in his occupation as a gay sex worker at the A.K. Modelling Agency, a decision borne out of financial exigency and social coercion. His clientele, comprising closeted gay men, are similarly entrapped by societal norms, compelled to maintain a façade of heterosexuality through marriage, while surreptitiously seeking same-sex encounters. These men, ensnared in a web of duplicity, discreetly solicit Milind's services in private, thereby avoiding detection by their families and perpetuating the clandestine nature of queer relationships in India. Ultimately, Milind's capitulation to heteronormative expectations is evidenced by his marriage to Leela, juxtaposed with his continued, clandestine relationship with Yudi, underscoring the tensions between his queer identity and societal expectations and exemplifying the phenomenon of queer mobility as a means of navigating these complexities.

Conclusion

The article delves deeply into the intricate construct of "tropicality" within the broader paradigm of Orientalism and the colonial legacy, wherein the tropical regions are construed as the Orient, subject to the hegemonic influence of Western powers. Within this discourse, the innate sexual fluidity indigenous to these regions is not only distorted but also subject to stereotypical portrayals, stemming from the colonial gaze. Through a meticulous analysis of Raja Rao's work, *The Boyfriend* (2016), characterised by the complex interplay of characters such as Yudi and Milind, emblematic of both psychological and physical mobility, the study meticulously dissects the deleterious

impact of colonialism on the queer populace. This narrative serves as a poignant tropical lens through which to explore the myriad challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in navigating a society rife with prejudice and discrimination. Moreover, the discourse cogently critiques the endemic sexual discrimination pervasive in tropical India, exacerbated by intersecting factors of socio-economic status, caste dynamics, and religious mores, which collectively conspire to perpetuate multiple layers of marginalisation for queer individuals. Despite the ostensibly progressive strides made through the decriminalisation of Section 377, thereby ostensibly liberating queer identities from the spectre of criminality, the insidious stigma surrounding homosexuality stubbornly persists, particularly within familial contexts. This enduring taboo underscores the entrenched nature of colonial ideologies and their enduring impact on contemporary Indian society. The article culminates in a resounding call to action, advocating for sustained efforts to dismantle the systemic barriers impeding LGBTQIA+ rights and dignity.

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Ethical Approval

We hereby declare that the study titled "Queering the Spatial Dynamics: A Study on Tropical Queer Mobility Amidst Binary Oppositions in Raja Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2016)" does not involve human participants. This research exclusively analyses the literary text *The Boyfriend* (2016) and does not collect or utilise any personal data, human subjects, or sensitive information. Therefore, ethical approval is not required.

Conflict of Interest

We declare that we have no competing interests. This article has not been submitted to any other journal and has not been previously published. We also declare that we have not received any financial support, and there is no financial conflict.

Author Contribution Statement

Azeena Parveen formulated the idea, selected the source and drafted the manuscript, while Dr Vineeth Radhakrishnan further developed the idea, reviewed the manuscript and edited it.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is not required for this manuscript as it does not deal with any human participants.

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Data Availability Statement

The primary and secondary data supporting this study are listed in the reference section. The provided links provide access to these sources.

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Azeena Parveen holds a Master's degree in English from the University of Madras and an MPhil from Presidency College, Chennai. In 2022, she qualified for the UGC NET and secured a JRF (NFOBC). Raised in a city that places great emphasis on culture and moral values, she has witnessed how queerness is often stigmatised. Drawing from this understanding, she analyses the emergence of spaces for queer relationships in India following the decriminalisation of Section 377. However, she notes that acceptance of queerness within families remains a challenge. She has previously published work on the stereotypes surrounding the female body, focusing on the *Female Body as the 'Other': Rituals and Biotechnical Approaches* using literary works such as Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and the film *Matrubhoomi: A*

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