

Anthems of Desire – A Study of R Raj Rao’s ‘*National Anthem and Other Poems*’

Huzaifa Pandit

Abstract: The paper proposes to study R Raj Rao’s ‘*National Anthem and Other Poems*’, to explore how Rao’s work constitutes a subversive discourse that illuminates the landscapes of queer desire constituted from the wide range of formulations of the queer self in post-colonial urban India. The paper argues that the texts are performative acts that create eroticised topographies created by and from the performance/consummation of sexual acts. Drawing from a close reading of selected poems, the study seeks to illuminate the politics and performance of a subversive aesthetic forged from an intersection between radical queer aesthetics, and the evolution of a queer subject both at odds and complicit with masculine right wing nationalism in contemporary India, a curious mix of free market liberalism, and celebratory post-colonial right wing majoritarianism that has strengthened the old heteronormative mores, rather than dissolving them even as India has decriminalised homosexuality.

Relying on close reading, the paper demonstrates that the idiom of decadence and decay in Rao’s poetry brings out in sharper relief not only the discordance and discontinuities of the heteronormative world but also its power to permeate subjectivities. His cityscape comes alive with deviant desire which paradoxically escapes the nuanced panoptic gaze of hetero-patriarchal hierarchies, only to write back into the confluence of bio-medical interventions, and the obsessive drive of post-colonial state to regulate and govern, even as it actively subverts and resists them by creating alternate mobile spaces where ‘taboo’ desire is articulated and performed. The contradictions draw attention to the complex nature of queer topographies in Post-Colonial Urban India, which must not be seen as a singular serotic space, but a highly contested space determined by confluences of ideology, power and class. The easy elision between marginality and marginalising in the poems brings to fore the larger contradictions of Post-Colonial India, where alongside a formal

decolonisation, a post-colonial subalternity contradicts and undercuts the democratic impulse which shaped counter-colonial movements.

Keywords: Raj Rao, National Anthem, Queer spaces, Section 377, Counter colonial resistance

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us

-Charles Dickens

The argument that texts produced in the west are not indicative of realities in the non-west is one, which even a beginner in Post-colonial studies will argue with great conviction, and rightly so. That said, sometimes the temptation to invoke western texts is great, as the words seem to resonate with the times that are. I invoke the opening lines of Dickens' 'Tale of Two Cities' in this spirit particularly to illustrate this moment in history when the colony and the post colony, east and west are almost indistinguishable in their tilt towards majoritarian right-wing conservatism, yet the acceptance of dissent, difference and diversity has hardly ever been greater.

The case of 'queerness' illustrates this best: across the world, the support for and acceptance of queer sexualities, relationships, families, activism and marriages, and scholarship around it has hardly been greater. Yet, the hatred and anxiety generated by homophobic impulses, and contestations of 'queerness' have hardly been greater as reflected by the common place incidence of hate crimes against queer populations across the world. In America alone, where queerness finds more acceptance than India, for example, more than 100,000 hate crime offenses have been reported since 1991 alone. (Marzullo and Libman 5).

In particular, I invoke Dickens' paradox to remind of the seminal judgment whereby the Indian Supreme Court decriminalised homosexuality by diluting a 158-year-old provision of the penal code – Section 377 that outlawed consensual homosexual sex, calling it "unconstitutional, irrational, indefensible and manifestly arbitrary" (Rautray). Even as the court has stepped in to declare laws outlawing 'same-sex' acts antithetical to cherished notions of equality and freedom, little has changed on the ground. Kaushal Bodwa – a queer

scholar from JNU was victim of a vicious and brutal online troll campaign including by openly gay men after author and right-wing ideologue Shefali Vaidya tweeted a picture of Bodwal wearing a bindi and nose-ring at a protest by students. (Karthikeyan).

I invoke these contradictions in an attempt to situate the upcoming 'National Anthem and Other Poems' in the matrix of postcolonial desire. The poems by Raj Rao, who has made it his stated aim to extend "the frontiers of gay literature in India" (Shetty), need to be examined and mapped first along the axes of decolonisation (of desire), and the contestations around decolonised identities. Rao's multiple roles – renowned equally for his activism, being one of the few and pioneering gay academics in the country, as for his literary pursuits, having authored four novels, three selections of poetry, a biography of Nissim Ezekiel and plays, and the unique position, both privileged and marginalised, offers a vantage point to examine the translation of desire in Post-Colonial India. It must engage with the specific material and cultural possibilities engendered by the war on desire, and dissent waged by the state that increasingly views non-conformity as incongruent with the ethic of discipline, uniformity, and unitary boundaries cherished, and sought.

Paola Bachheta has argued for example that "queer- phobia is one of the pillars of Hindu nationalism. Second, the constructions of queer genders and sexualities, which appear in Hindu nationalism, are largely effects of Hindu nationalist reworkings of misogynist notions of gender and heterosexist notions of sexual normativity imposed through colonialism. These effects are manifested in a binary in which qualities of virile, militaristic masculinity combined with obligatory asexuality (for Hindu nationalist leaders) and forced heterosexuality (for Hindu nationalized masses) are valorized and placed in opposition to queer gender and sexuality (assigned to all Others). In this scheme, queer gender and sexuality are constructed as already outside the Hindu nation; when queerness re-enters, it must be immediately exiled." (Bacchetta 43). The native texts produced by queer authors like Raj Rao can then be understood as a reclamation, a homecoming to topographies that house 'vagrants' and 'outcasts', and thus is marked by constellations of multifaceted desire.

Shraddha Chatterjee points out, therefore, that "Queer has become a repository of many things over time. To *be* queer is an identity; to *live* a queer life is embodiment; to *do* queer things is action, doing something *queerly/queering* something are processes." (Chatterjee 1) Anna Marie Jagose also draws attention to this multiplicity pointing out that though queer is not aligned to any identitarian categorisation, yet it is "is largely understood to be the latest institutional manifestation of Lesbian and Gay studies. Queer can primarily be identified as a performative act that repudiates assumed coherences in hegemonic models

of sex, gender and desire by dramatizing and accentuating incoherencies”; the performance fuelled by the “definitional indeterminacy, elasticity.” of the label queer. (Jagose 1)

This definitional ambiguity is precisely the defining strength of queerness, as it shifts the body politic towards a non-conforming, non-normative and confrontational ethic. Fundamentally, queer exists therefore in the sphere of representation – a performative refusal and resistance to heteronormative representations. The term heteronormativity presumes a world order based on heterosexist representations and assumptions that allows for the perpetuation and acceptance of heterosexual models as authentic, natural and unproblematic representations of the lived experiences, and accordingly exert pressure by threat of exclusion and labelling to conform to such representations. Rao’s poems are precisely meant to resist these naturalised representations, by refusing to engage with or articulate them, and so seeks to expose the arbitrary nature of such ‘factual’ representations. Under the epithet of ‘terrorist of the spirit’, his poetry seeks to declare war on colonisation of desire, and is thus engaged in outlining theerotics of post-colonialism in the Indian context.

To begin with the beginning, the prologue makes a bold proclamation of breaking with the tradition of restraint and censorship, declaring the speaker to be a “terrorist of the spirit” whose “colour of blood/it’s blue, /the colour of ink.” (Rao 1) The book starts, therefore, with the poem ‘National Anthem’, a gay anthem of sorts, which sets the tone for the book with its deliberately prosaic narration, and complete abandonment of standard poetic imagery, tropes or devices. At one level, the experiment works well. Set in a cinema, the poem revolves around a single scandalous incident where the speaker is fondling his ‘boyfriend’, when the cinema goers rise to the national anthem played before the movie. Unable to get his hand out as “his ripped jeans were so tight”, he concludes “To stand up at such a time/would be to make public the dirty games we were up to/in the dark of the cinema hall”. (Rao 3). The poem is apparently a jibe at ‘compulsory nationalism’, which among other things has manifested in the compulsory playing of the national anthem in cinemas. The highest court of the land – Supreme Court made it mandatory to play the anthem in cinemas in 2016. It also made it “mandatory for every member in the audience to stand up and pay their respects to the anthem... to instil feelings of constitutional patriotism and nationalism in them” (India Today). The poem brings an element of farce to a situation that demands ‘reverence’ by bringing in a reference to the famous British burlesque comedy sitcom – Mr Bean: (Rao) “We did not wish to be Mr. Bean/who, as a consequence of slipping his hand/into a stranger’s back pocket at a department store.../was obliged to follow him to the store’s washroom.” (Rao 3). The cinema, then, emerges as a

liberatory space, which repudiates the “universal heteronormative code that validates the heterosexual as a dominant signifier.... the ‘traditional heteronorm – the older bread winning protecting husband, the younger pliant dependent wife, the missionary position and the two children quickly conceived of it, the proud compliance with conjugal heterosexual morals that see sex as sticky, icky bed room business ratified by and in heterosexual marriage alone.” (Bose and Bhattacharyya 13). The dirty games emerge as an affront to a normative notion of sex as fundamentally procreative, which rarely leaves room for conceiving sex for pleasure. As the cinema allows a transgression and transcendence of the norm, it creates other possibilities including but not confined to homosexual sex, oral sex, and other non-penetrative forms like fondling.

The poem allows the cinema to be understood, therefore, as a dissenting ‘space’ translated by specific non-normative practices of intimacy from the original inanimate ‘place’. The distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’ can be understood as explained by Michel De Certeau who distinguishes the two as part of evolving a semiotics of resistance against the ‘panoptic’ gaze of the omniscient city. Certeau argues that a place is marked by an adherence to discipline and hierarchy, and thus a stable “configuration of positions.” A space on the other hand is an unstable configuration formed by “intersections of mobile elements.... vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.” (Certeau 117). However, a contradictory trajectory is at play too where the cinema becomes a space for articulation of virulent and violent masculinity that blends seamlessly with the colonial masculinity, where the orient is necessarily effeminate. The cinema allows the actor to transform into a ‘hero’ i.e. from a professional to an ideal, thus establishing him not only as a highly desirable ‘man’, but also a ‘man’ whose lead ought to be followed. This conversion allows the ‘hero’ the privilege and economic clout to escape his culpability, and “prove that he did not run his Land Rover/over pavement dwellers” by sharing the millions he made with “lawyers and judges” (Rao 3). The cinema then becomes complicit in the hetero-patriarchal violence that permits obfuscation of the narratives of suffering and violation in the post-colony.

By foregrounding the erasure of justice and collusion of the law, the poem then draws attention to postcolonial subalternity, and the failure of normative institutions like government and judiciary to alleviate it. The national anthem, which speaks of ownership and pride in the nation assumes an ironic hue as the nation fails its inhabitants to whom it promised security and justice irrespective of caste, creed or status. Moreover, the cinema

goers who rise to the anthem become complicit in the erasure of justice as their celebratory nationalism provides adequate and effective cover for evading discomfiting questions of justice and access. The gesture of the queer narrator, therefore, emerges as a protest against this complicity, and a refusal to respect and accept the power of normative structures, while establishing a solidarity and kinship with the marginalised ‘pavement dwellers’ – both symbolically (by his refusal to treat the anthem as sacred, and engaging in clandestine sex), and literally (by pleasuring a roadside dweller). The cinema emerges as a contested space where both contradictory trajectories – conformity and dissent coexist, and thus is marked by the double bind of post-colonial identity - an identity which seeks to declare its departure from colonial modes of identity, yet is necessarily (and increasingly in current times) complicit in them. It is interesting to note that section 377 of Indian Penal Code, which till recently outlawed gay sex, was drafted by Lord Macaulay during colonial times, and still continues to shape the outrage and disgust towards queer sex in the collective Indian imagination. The queering of the cinema hall offers an insight into the fundamental instability of ontological categories of identity, nationhood and citizenship which form the bedrock of normative imaginations of the nation.

The queering works at another level – that of form. As alluded to earlier, the poem is deliberately prosaic and a species of ‘bad poetry’. It embodies a definite ‘anti-metaphoric flavour’ and clearly espouses an ideological tilt of resisting state iconography. In its prosaic language it refutes the canonical standards of poetry and the academy’s insistence on style, form and diction. It also refuses conformity to the romantic ideal of inspiration and composition, since it is neither concerned with aesthetic pleasure, nor invokes the ideal of tranquility. This process of poetic production alludes back to the original debate on the function of literature – pleasure or instruction. Poetry such as the National Anthem tilts heavily towards instruction, even as it can provide pleasure in its own right by its humour. Its aesthetic is the aesthetic of decolonization, and transgression of colonial and canonical idioms, which mandates the adoption of clear ideological positions to counter subjugation of marginalized people as queer populations. As the sociologist Keith Ellis points out, “The tendency to dismiss much of third world poetry as ‘propaganda’ or pamphleteering derives in fact from the attempted universal legislation of what is a very local or regionally based definition of poetry, one which following Aristotle’s script in *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* sees in metaphor the essential ingredient of poetic language.” (Ellis 48).

However, while the poem is engaged in constructing an idiom of decolonized desire, it embodies a contradictory movement as well that unravels its decolonizing impulse. This reversal draws primarily from the two contradictory impulses that fuel the poem’s quest to

establish an ethic of solidarity— an impulse of difference, as well as impulse of homogeneity. The ‘roadside boyfriend’ and the ‘country liquor bar’ contrast with the refined “English speaking poet” who possesses cultural capital (being able to not just *write poetry*, a genre that requires expertise with symbolism, metaphoricity and expressivity but also write it in *English*, the language of intelligentsia and social mobility, and moreover get it *published*, which confers a distinction of worthiness, and quality to the work), and presumably material wealth too. Besides, the adjective ‘roadside’ is clearly a class marker, which can only acquire significance when the other (the speaker) is not a roadside “riff-raff”. In fact, the speaker provides a clear introduction to himself in ‘Srinivasan’: “Both of us taught literature at the university/and were chairs of our departments.” (Rao 32) This poem is keen to foreground the transaction between these two characters at opposite ends of the social stratum to bring out the radical hue of their erotic transaction.

Contrasting with this is the homogeneity impulse which seeks to eradicate difference – all the cinemagoers stand up in reverence, thus temporarily suspending their differences (of caste, creed, religion, colour, sex and gender) in favour of a unitary identity – the Indian citizen. On a more visceral level, the hero-actor’s act of running over pavement dwellers must also be seen as an act of erasure – a literal erasure of occupants of lower class to demonstrate and perpetuate his privilege accrued from his class. This contrast is meant to demonstrate the difference between the real hero – the headstrong, carefree poetic speaker, who is on the right side of transgression, and the screen hero- corrupt, reckless and murderous, who is on the wrong side of transgression.

However, in its anxiety to spell out its intentions clearly, it ends up practicing the same obfuscation and erosion of subaltern agency that it set out to protest in the first place. In the first place, the poem allows the boyfriend little agency. He is marked as ‘roadside’ clearly to indicate his lowly origins, which makes it easier for him to be ‘picked’. Notice the use of passive, which shifts the focus of the sentence on the ‘boyfriend’ and allows the speaker to recede into the background. This receding contrasts sharply with the routine of the poem, where the boyfriend is always seen, and spoken in the company of the speaker, as constituting the other half of first person plural ‘we’ used not less than six times in the poem. No instance occurs in the poem, where the ‘boyfriend’ is described as independent of the speaker. On the contrary, he is doubly marked with the presence of the speaker by markers of possession, followed by being conjugated with ‘I’ – the singular authorial self. The phrase ‘my boyfriend and I’ occurs three times, while ‘my boyfriend’ occurs once. The two instances where the boyfriend appears to exist on his own: “because my hand was in his underpants/and his ripped jeans were too tight” are also significantly coloured by

authorial presence. The two lines supply the reason for the author's inability to pull his hand out as the anthem came on. While there is no reason to suspect that the transaction might be non-consensual, it is striking that the upper-class speaker appropriates all agency except 'picking up'.

What explains this discomfiture with 'picking up', and an almost obsessive impulse of ownership? A possible clue is found in author's choice of euphemisms – backside (rather than 'arse' as in case of slum dwellers), formal descriptions like underpants instead of simply pants or underwear, or snide euphemisms – 'Land of Pure', a cynical (and often denigrating) reference to Pakistan, and its theocratic origin. For an aesthetic concerned with breaking barriers, and determined to be as plain, and colloquial as possible, this euphemism, insinuation and decorum appear to strike a contrarian note. However, if read in the light of the earlier discomfiture with 'picking up', the unconscious ideological undercurrents of an exploitative class consciousness can be delineated clearly.

The act of 'picking up' in itself is non-normative, especially as it refutes the ideal of both 'romantic love' and 'love making'. Both terms imply a prior emotional investment as a prelude to sex, and therefore, sex emerges as a disinterested act. 'Picking up', on the other hand, solely prioritizes 'carnal desire' over 'romance', and seeks no prior acquaintance, albeit it brings an edge of dissent to the category 'boyfriend' by refusing the normative classification of a romantic partner. However, the application of 'picking up' to '*roadside*¹' boyfriend brings in an additional element of 'commerce' to the liaison – a respectable upper class 'poet' solicits a 'roadside' male. In other words, the consent of the 'boyfriend' may not entirely be due to 'carnal desire', but also 'motivated' by need and deprivation. Such a transaction writes back into the exploitative hetero-patriarchal structures, where women/men (usually out of compulsion) trade off their bodies in return of money. This is clearly alluded to in 'You are Terrorists' where the speaker and his ilk are accused of *luring* "blue collared workers with fake currency notes/to make whores of them." (Rao 6) Moreover, it replicates the hierarchal with hetero-normative structures, the *upper-class male* presses his privilege to his advantage and benefit from the body of the lower-classes. Such a possibility of being complicit in exploitation stands uneasily with the professed politics of the poem, and hence the evasion of focus and employment of passive. The 'roadside' body gets 'picked', while the agent of 'picking' conveniently bears no responsibility for his complicity.

¹All italics for reference mine

This censoring also explains the revisionary tilt where the euphemism and cynicism writes back into the disgust, which arises from violation of 'heteronormative' codes of hygiene and decency like privacy. In his book "The Anatomy of Disgust", Ian Miller recalls that the sentiment of disgust evokes a strong sentiment of aversion to an object/phenomenon conceived of as dangerous owing to its power to "contaminate, infect, pollute by proximity or ingestion". (Miller 4) . One of the ideational notions that determines the notion of contagion and pollution has been provided by Mary Douglas, who argues that pollution behaviour is a label attached to "any object or idea likely to confuse and contradict cherished classifications". She points out that notions of dirt and pollution are simply "residual categories, rejected from the normal scheme of classification" i.e. behaviour and cues that do not fit the behavioural matrix considered healthy and desirable by a society. Therefore, the label dirt and exclusion to maintain the sanctity of the norm. (Douglas 7) The Speaker's censoring and euphemism then follows from the same impulse of categorisation and hierarchy, where 'roadside' boyfriends and 'riff-raff' are fit for 'pick-up', but not to speak or articulate their agency. The appropriation of the insinuation 'land of the pure' is interesting, since it occurs not as a direct quote attributed to the policemen, but as a reported claim. It implies that it is either the speaker's description of 'Pakistan', or either the policemen indeed threatened to exile him to 'the land of the pure'. Either way, it points out that the speaker sees no case to contest the insinuation, and is comfortable with the usage. While formal religion is understandably the target of queer ire, the particular description of 'land of pure' follows from meta-narratives of war on terrorism, which employs thinly veiled islamophobia, and is ardently subscribed to by Hindu nationalism that considers Islamic cultures to be contaminating aberrations in an ancient, pure, Hindu civilisation. 'Purity' is used as a denigration to expose 'hypocrisy' of people who are 'inherently' violent and consumed by 'blood-lust'. The appropriation of the description, therefore, enacts the same erosion of marginality by rigging narratives, as the speaker accuses the actor of.

Moreover, by his insistence of not wishing to emulate Bean's toilet shenanigans, and not wishing the cinema usher to die of shock, the speaker only ends up foregrounding the classic heteronormative formulations of privacy, hygiene and decency. By foregrounding the undesirability of the eccentricity of Mr Bean, and normalising 'public indecency' for Bombay slum dwellers. In this normalisation lies a peculiar violence, where not only are the slum dwellers mapped on the negative side of difference, which must be avoided by the queer protagonists, but also in the fact that such categorisation makes possible a host of possibilities and presuppositions about the conceiving the individual body in relationship to, and in negotiation with outside factors, foregrounding its capacity to make

vulnerable and contaminate them. In this formulation of risk and contamination, it seeks only to strengthen the bio-medical gaze of the state, which blends well with the neo-colonial nostalgia for and anxieties of originatory and purity that is the staple of post-colonial state, especially in its neo-colonial variant. While queering seeks to own and realise the radical potential of contaminating, subversion and crossing-over, the normalising anxiety of the queer poet stands in direct confrontation with the liberatory tenor of the queer ethic. If it were argued that the queerness employs self-deprecatory irony, and so the declaration of ‘shock’ and ‘dirtiness’ must be read as subtle sarcasm, it fails to take into account that one it amounts to intentional fallacy. The text provides no clue that it intends to be sarcastic, on the contrary its claim to poetry is the subversion of the aesthetic of ‘slant’, multiplicity and metaphoricity. Second, the uncontested appropriation of the language of normativity, without any mitigating circumstances to illustrate their operation and violence only ends up legitimising them.

This paradoxical impulse can be observed more closely by examining the poem *‘You are Terrorists’* in relation to *‘Flesh Trade’*. The former is an inventory of charges brought against queer men by homophobic societies. It is the closet approximation of the homophobic right wing anxieties where alpha masculinity is fetishized, and breeds a toxic nationalism, where all revisionary anxieties around diversity, debate, and dissent are crystallised into a violent and obsessive desire for conformity to the idea of a ‘pure’ and ‘uncontaminated’ nation: “You want to secede from the union/and have an independent homeland/where men fuck men/where you will say Gay Hind (haind) instead of Jai Hind.” (Rao 5) The majoritarian turn alluded to by these lines has always been a latent danger as being the natural culmination of the anti-colonial articulations, which first need a crystallisation of a single national identity to be reclaimed from the coloniser. The accusation draws from the binary of pre-lapsarian civilised antiquity versus the post-lapsarian wilderness of the present to create a meta narrative of nostalgia, which aids creation of easy ontological categories like traitor, anti-national, patriot etc. The accusation, therefore, foregrounds not only the realities of margins, but at the same time the confluence of identities, interests and ideologies that constitute the neo-liberal, post-colonial state. It is easy, therefore, to understand why queer men are placed in the same category as ‘Muslims’, the perpetual others, held responsible for promotion of social engineering and terrorism in the post 9-11, war on terrorism world: “This is sex jihad/You are pederasts. /You insert your tools into our kids’ backsides/just as you ram your planes into the windows of the WTC towers.” (Rao 5) .

In an interesting conflation, the accusers make a strange conflation: “You need laws to harness you, /370 and 377” (Rao 5). The verb ‘harness’ itself brings a rich ironic resonance to the narrative. Literally, it implies the act of reining in and controlling a problematic/rogue element, and so the penal power of law is evoked to warn and direct the deviant population to fall in line. However, harnessing is also a key technique in BDSM (Bondage Domination, Sadomachostic) kink fantasies where the recipient derives sexual pleasure out of being harnessed. The unwitting allusion then undercuts the piquancy of the remark, and seeks to demonstrate the employment of humour as a vehicle of subversion. However, while the punitive value of undiluted erstwhile Section 370 of IPC is clear, the same is not true of the now abrogated Article 377 of Indian Constitution. Under Sec 370, sex against the order of nature, which was largely interpreted as non-vaginal sexual intercourse, was criminalised. Since gay men inhabit more public spaces, owing to hetero-patriarchal mores, it was largely employed as an instrument of extortion and intimidation against them. Article 377, on the other hand, was a special concession to the erstwhile state of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, enacted by the Government of India, in view of the special histories and realities of the princely state, post partition. It granted land rights to the permanent residents of the state, and prevented outsiders from seeking employment or domicile rights in the state. The question then arises is: How does Article 370 constitute a punitive instrument? The answer draws from the view held by right wing supporters, and articulated officially by the government that Article 370 acted as a roadblock to integration of the country, and promoted secessionism that fed into wellsprings of terror to intimidate legal citizens of the country. In this narrative, then, the Muslim population of the valley are imagined as supporters and proponents of terror, who were encouraged by Article 370. In this sense, 370 was a punishment since it implied that the people of Kashmir were prevented from accessing avenues of progress, and remained mired in ideologies of terror and conservatism. The similarity between Muslims and the Queer populations is thus well entrenched, as both suffer from the impulse of erasure of difference, and a hegemonic normativity.

In contrast ‘Flesh Trade’, is a vicious compendium of Indian Muslims, which employs every trope of right wing imagination. While the earlier poem employs the pronoun ‘you’ – second person plural, indicating an accusatory tone, this poem employs ‘We’ – First person plural to indicate a confessional voice. In a voice, inspired heavily by Rushdie’s Satanic Verses, the muslim narrators indicate their gluttony and greed, their toxic philandering masculinity and aversion to ‘hygiene’ after they have declared profession as ‘flesh trade’. While some sympathy is reserved for ‘sex workers’, who are perceived as ‘victims’, the men attract no sympathy, rather attract contempt as ‘pimps’. They attract

contempt not only for being exploiters, but equally as an aberration to patriarchal codes of 'masculinity' – where the Man (breadwinner) – woman (Dependent) equation is the desirable one, rather than Woman (breadwinner)- Man (dependent). As a pun on the 'meat-trade', the term evokes the stereotype of barbaric, violent men who slaughter helpless animals to satisfy their gluttony, who are contrasted with the genteel vegetarian Hindu bourgeoisie. More specifically, it evokes the common accusation against Indian Muslims that they slaughter cows, a holy animal in some strains of Hinduism, to satisfy their fanatic urges to put other religions down. On another level, it also borrows from the plot of 'Satanic Verses' where the dissident poet – Baal, who takes shelter in a brother where the prostitutes enact an elaborate and popular role play by taking on the names of the wives of the Prophet Mahound, a thinly veiled reference to Prophet Mohamad (PBUH). The poem therefore suggests "We are in the flesh trade/We Love the Profit" (Rao 11) However, while *Satanic verses*, with all its defects, is an attempt at creating a different aesthetic of play, fluidity and revolt against realistic fiction to highlight subjectivities in the Post-Colonial world, the poem's clear reliance on statement, and confessional tone suggests that the descriptions must be taken to be authentic tropes. The appropriation of all stereotypes such as philandering, polygamous muslim men, the denigration of prayer: "In the name of prayer/we hump ourselves five times a day/like soldier doing drill/to stay fit" serve as particular reminders that queer experience can also be mediated through, and be complicit in a majoritarian consciousness, even as it suffers at its hands. This contradiction is a timely reminder of the unfinished project of decolonisation of desire in India, where heteronormativity exists in its most unadulterated, and naturalised form.

The complicity highlights the complex operations of networks of power, where gay men perform the power drawn from the naturalized connection traced between the male body and nodes of masculinity. As queer men exert their queerness under hetero-patriarchal systems, the male-male relationships are determined by hetero-patriarchal power dynamics of exclusion. The contradictions point out that the radical potentialities of queerness are tamed, and restrained by being appropriated by a class consciousness where privilege offsets and makes invisible the larger structural violence faced by the marginalised. The paradox evoked by these poems suggests that a radical decolonisation of desire may yet be a pipe dream, and especially draws attention to the power of class to interpellate by constituting paradoxical queer subjectivities through complicity in social-interactions, which mirror the larger hetero-normative structures that they apparently seek to oppose. The contestations which emerge by a study of the three poems draws attention to the complex nature of queer topographies in Post-Colonial Urban India, which must not be seen as an isolated linear erotic space, but a highly contested space determined by

confluences of ideology, power and class. The easy elision between marginality and marginalising in the poems brings to fore the larger contradictions of Post-Colonial India, where alongside a formal decolonisation, a post-colonial subalternity contradicts and undercuts the democratic impulse which shaped counter-colonial movements.

It can safely be concluded then the texts are performative acts that create eroticised topographies created by and from the performance/consummation of sexual acts. By their paradoxical impulses, they illuminate the politics and performance of a subversive aesthetic forged from an intersection between radical queer aesthetics, and the evolution of a queer subject both at odds and complicit with masculine right wing nationalism in contemporary India, a curious mix of free market liberalism, and celebratory post-colonial right wing majoritarianism that has strengthened the old heteronormative mores, rather than dissolving them even as India has decriminalised homosexuality. Their idiom of decadence and decay brings out in sharper relief not only the discordance and discontinuities of the heteronormative world but also its power to permeate subjectivities. His cityscape comes alive with deviant desire which paradoxically escapes the nuanced panoptic gaze of hetero-patriarchal hierarchies, only to write back into the confluence of bio-medical interventions, and the obsessive drive of post-colonial state to regulate and govern, even as it actively subverts and resists them by creating alternate mobile spaces where 'taboo' desire is articulated and performed. This performance helps peel away the naturalised and neutral heterosexuality of public spaces to highlight that they are created from a complicated matrix of power and difference, and charged with desire and its performance.

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