

# CHAPTER THREE

## QUEER KINSHIP IN NEW QUEER INDIA: FROM WADIA'S BOMGAY TO R. RAJA RAO'S "CROCODILE TEARS"

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Established academic debates surrounding representation of queer identities in India have time and again illuminated the relationship between sexual (and gendered) subjectivities and the state. More often than not queer individuals themselves have fixated on heteronormativising their queerness. For many, such articulations of "fitting in" with the rest evidence a social/cultural and even political progress, but for radical queer activists and scholars this signifies a backward trend of servicing the neo-liberal agenda. Lisa Duggan (2002, 179) has called this homonormativity and has argued that it is "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption".

This essay therefore is a mediation of and an argument against this neo-liberal progress which assumes a universal queer identity (see Massad 2007 and Altman 1997) structured around normative family structures (through same sex marriages and adoption) and a de-essentialising of the queer body through hyper masculinity/femininity (Dasgupta and Gokulsing 2014). As recent research has suggested, there are newer ways to understand queerness beyond the state sponsored homonormativities (Puar 2006). Scholar and activist Judith Halberstam's recent work on Gaga feminism (2012) sifts through popular cultural artefacts to uncover how these media artefacts contain within them a blueprint of dominant (heteronormative/mainstream) culture with its emphasis on stasis, norms and conventions. She writes:

Gaga feminism is a politics that brings together meditations on fame and visibility with a lashing critique of the fixity of roles for males and females. It is a scavenger feminism that borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotype and cliché all at the same time. Gaga feminism is also a feminism made up of stutter steps and hiccups, as is clear in the world opened up in Telephone in both the music and the image: the off-beat, flickering, humming aesthetic that the video creates depends upon the liveliness of objects in the Gagandscape (and the inertia of the human bodies), and it creates a beat for Gaga that is best represented as a sonic form of hesitation. (2012,5)

Thinking through this radical anarchised lens, my essay here makes two broad moves. One, I want to suggest that queer kinship can be understood beyond the family/one-lover narrative espoused by the neo-liberal agenda and, two, that Indian queer literature (especially Rao's work) has often illuminated this production of queer dislocation in focusing on how otherness can be constituted within queer identity categories. I want to move this discussion beyond the postcolonial dynamics of queer identity in India (Vanita and Kidwai 2000) and focus on the slippages and "repressed queer narratives" (Halberstam 2011). In doing this I am aware of being called "traitorous to a politically pure history of homosexuality" (*ibid.*, 171), but suggest examining these contradictory and oft silenced sites which would provide a micro lens in understanding the queer politics of negotiation in India.

According to Vanita and Kidwai, the politically careless imputation of a schism between homosexuality and Indian tradition only serves to nourish the hysterical and homophobic rhetoric of conservative lobbies at home, eager to perpetuate "the myth that same sex love is a disease imported into India from the West" (Vanita and Kidwai 2000, xxiv). The ongoing queer literary output from India provides a compelling frame of cultural artefacts to construct a post liberalised, postcolonial Indian Queer history. Thrusting queer issues through the print/literary medium has helped propel a greater queer consciousness and discourse. Literature works with the "intersubjective areas and relations between public representations, including those of the communications media, and the lived consciousness of individual subjects" (Pickering 1997, 63–64). This is crucial in understanding the queer literature from India: the combination of detailing everyday lived experience and the social construction which structures its representation and narrative. Queerness is a narrative within and yet against heterosexual discourses and tries to achieve the effect of typifying the queer. Thus any discussion on sexual identity invariably leads to the ways in which such an identity has already been configured.

It is curious that otherwise remarkably astute work in postcolonial studies, working with categories such as gender, class and caste, are silent on sexual orientation. Evidently discussions of modernity and gender roles in contemporary India remain couched in notions of heterosexual modernity. The discourse of the family is thus a discourse of heterosexuality itself. One of the central issues of regulation of sexuality is kinship (*yaarana*) and the institutionalised relationship. In essence these texts provide a fertile terrain to engage upon and discuss queer identities in India within the academic canon of literature. We need to be attentive to the subtle operations of power in the area of sexuality in postcolonial India which denies sexual subalterns the right to assert their identity. The image needs to be understood discursively, as reinforcing traditional assumptions of sex and sexuality as holding out the possibility of challenge from within. Recognising the deeply problematic nature of the conservative sexual morality and cultural values which come to inform regulation of sexual speech and expression, these texts seek to engage discursively with these notions. The discursive struggles over sexual speech, expression and identity reflect the deeply political aspect of sexuality in India which these two texts consciously inhabit and confront.

I agree with Arjun Appadurai's sentiment that lives are "inextricably linked with representations" (2001, 63–64). I thus find it extremely vital to link the contribution and representation of queerness in the Indian media, "not only as technical adjuncts but as primary material with which to construct and interrogate our own representations" (*ibid.*).

Before going into a discussion of Rao's recent short story "Crocodile Tears" (Rao, 2012) I would like to turn back to one of his most famous literary outputs to date, namely his poetry collection *Bomgay*. In choosing to analyse *Bomgay* I would like to extend the reading of the poem to Wadia's celebrated short cinematic vignette which Rao collaborated on. In choosing to do so I am in agreement with Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2013) and Rachel Dwyer (2010, 381) who argues that "Hindi cinema deserves our attention, not just as a form in itself but also as the best and most reliable guide to modern India". Dwyer, citing Charles Taylor's work on imaginaries, has argued that imaginaries offer a way of understanding modern India, making sense of its norms and anxieties. It shall also allow me to track the transformation of queer kinship (if any has occurred) across the fifteen years separating these two texts.

## From text to screen: *Bomgay*

*Bomgay* is a collection of six poetic vignettes by R. Raj Rao about “Mumbai same sex subcultural life” (Waugh 2002, 194). It was first screened in December 1996 at Bombay’s National Centre for the Arts. The six vignettes are interlinked through a “quasi-socio-political frame” (Wadia 2000, 320) which places the film within a contemporary social context. This frame muses on the hypocrisy of living a shamed life of anonymity, where love cannot be freely expressed and the privilege of being able to come out in public. An excerpt of this frame reads:

The purity of love subverted, the twisted soul escapes into a world of fantasy. The individual spirit purges itself by revelling in its victimisation... The love that dare not speak its name now sits across the table and debates its cause. The protagonists are self-respect and accountability. The antagonists hypocrisy and self-denial. (*Bomgay*, 1996)

The film has been severely criticised by many for its extravagant and fantastic portrayal of gay men in India which is far from the truth (Waugh 2000) but according to Wadia himself he was attempting to “portray the emergence of a small gay community that dwells in Bombay and who choose to interpret the word ‘gay’ as practiced and loosely defined... in the western hemisphere” (Wadia 2000, 322). This Westernised lens is evident in the aesthetics that govern the film. In the title poem, “*Bomgay*”, the queer subculture of Mumbai is identified through a sampling of the Oriental fetishism of Western tourists:

Family Members  
 From England, America and Canada  
 Visit you at Bombay  
 Which they call *Bomgay*  
 Some of them are sex tourists,  
 You their postcolonial pimp  
 Hungry for pounds and dollars (*Bomgay*, 1996)

The vignette presents a gay male New Yorker as the “sex tourist” and the narrator as the “postcolonial pimp”. It introduces the viewer to three sites of homoerotic expression in the Mumbai landscape—Western styled gay clubs, men’s public toilets and finally the steeple of Apsara Theatre (Waugh 2002). These three sites can be thought of as connected and overlapping as well as “strangely familiar” with each other. Borrowing Dudrah’s (2010) work on the “haptic urban ethnoscapes”, which he defines as the idea of multisensory visuality which represents and articulates the

urban cultural geographies, I want to suggest extending the textual reading of the film beyond the materiality of the film alone, in terms of how we might think about the queer representation as being played out in related cultural geographies. We are able to posit, as a matter of fact, questions such as: Who is being represented and by whom? What are the power relations at play in this act of representation? And who is included/excluded within this representation? *Bomgay* complicates some of these issues. Whilst it unabashedly exoticises the phallic significance of the Apsara Theatre, which according to the film is what the sex tourist loves the most (over the more Western clubs), it also places the queer representation very firmly within an upper class sensibility. In “Opinions”, the first vignette, for example, the man is seen reading a newspaper whilst gazing from a superior position at his maidservant, whilst the protagonists in the other vignettes are tie wearing office goers, college students indulging in orgiastic fantasies in Victorian libraries (“Lefty”) or the foreign man scouring gay locales in Mumbai.

The *Bomgay* vignette also introduces the sex tourist as “family” which according to Waugh (2002, 195) is a “wry parodic pointer to both bodily appendages and queer kinship”. Queer kinship according to Butler (2002) is not the same as gay marriage; rather it can be read as a reworking and revision of the social organisation of friendship, sexual contacts and community to produce non-state-centred forms of support and alliance. With India’s homophobic state interventions which systematically criminalise homosexuality (Vanita and Kidwai 2000; Vanita, 2005), these forms of kinship are the closest one can imagine. Vanita (2005, 60) explains that traditional Indian families not only incorporate “grandparents, widowed aunts and uncles or orphaned cousins but also family friends and elderly servants on whom kinship is bestowed”. In similar ways gay men and women who are chastised for their sexual choices by their family and removed from this family structure choose to build families with sexual partners, ex-partners and friends. An example of this, as Vanita (2005) recounts, is that when a gay man in Delhi was unexpectedly hospitalised, his “chosen” family members (who are outside the biological family), about a dozen people, claimed to be his cousins and were allowed into his room.

The most famous of the six vignettes in *Bomgay* is probably “Lefty” which starred Rahul Bose and Kushal Punjabi (two amateurs who went on to become well known in Bollywood in later years). The visual utopia of overabundance is clearly visible in this sequence which is shot in a dimly-lit colonial style library with huge mirrors. Betsky (1997) has commented that gays and lesbians have been at the forefront of architectural

innovation, reclaiming abandoned neighbourhoods, redefining urban spaces and creating liberating interiors out of hostile environments. The library is far from being a liberating space but Wadia recreates and stylises queer performance (literally through the orgiastic visuals) in which conservative representations of the nation, signified through the colonial buildings and institutional identification (Fort Campus Library) can be read and contested through re-enactments and performances of the very act of reading or sitting in a library. Going back to Dudrah (2010), I want to analyse this space through the notion of “haptic urban ethnoscapes”. I want to recall here that the very title of this piece, “Lefty”, signifies an otherisation. The narrator comments on how the “lefty is stared at by the readers for writing with his left hand”. Following this the narrator says “speaking isn’t allowed in the library but looking is” which is read against the backdrop of Rahul being sodomised by Kushal. This highly suggestive scene teases the viewers to look straight at the screen and enables different scripts (the visual and the aural) to coexist alongside each other, and through this issues of identification and representation are cast. The Fort Campus Library thus contributes to the private display of queer desires, and it does this alongside other scripts of everyday institutional life. Here unexpected and promiscuous interactions can take place within the liminal and guarded space of an institutional library.

### **Cry me a River: Crocodile Tears**

In her illuminating introduction to *Out: Stories from the New Queer India*, Hajratwala has noted that the closet in India is not only a compromise but it is “also comfort and protection. For some the desire to keep their intimate lives under strict lock and key is a privilege to be defended” (2012, 13). It is within this space that Rao’s “Crocodile Tears” is situated. This short story is an unapologetic account of an intimate relationship between the editor of a publishing company and one of his employees, Ashutosh. It explores issues around intimacy, family and class.

The narrator of the story is in an intimate relationship with Ashutosh, the typesetter in the publishing house where he works. Ashutosh’s subaltern status (economically and socially) places him within an ambivalent space where he is uneasy about his sexuality (both to himself and the outside world).

He once told me that if anyone got a whiff of our romance, he would leave the town and return to his native place... for he would never be able to face the world again. (2012, 248)

Rao's characters, despite their "stock" quality, become, to some extent, reflections of what they see and hear; confronted by the world around them, they attempt to make meaningful decisions based on their perceptions. So whilst the narrator finds no problem in coming out and making his sexuality public, based on his class status amongst other things (Henderson, 2013), Ashutosh finds it much harder to come out and remains within the toxic closet (Barton, 2013). They retain the quality of being open to development and supplementation, also, by the reader, in a commonly-experienced fictional manner. The realities are exposed through a series of sequences—from Ashutosh hurriedly hiding when Richard makes an appearance to his unapologetic manner in borrowing the narrator's money. Rao moves deliberately and seamlessly from injecting pathos into the characters to elegiac tonalities, bringing his characters into and out of the world of nature and mankind in a way that preserves its verisimilitude to "lived life", with its highs and lows on any given day.

What complicates this set up is India's "compulsory heterosexuality" and Ashutosh's family obligations which drive him to marriage. This is however a small hiccup in their relationship. Ashutosh continues to rely upon the narrator for economic help and their physical intimacy remains even after marriage. In fact Rao complicates this further by introducing a sexual tension between Ashutosh's wife and the narrator. However, does this complicated set up in anyway delimit the queer potential of Ashutosh and the narrator? Butler (2002) would say not. Writing about kinship, she critically notes:

For a progressive sexual movement, even one that may want to produce marriage as an option for non-heterosexuals, the proposition that marriage should become the only way to sanction or legitimate sexuality is unacceptably conservative. (21)

The narrator takes on both the role of the lover as well as the role of the parent for Ashutosh.

"Give me the privilege to be both your father and mother", I said to him.  
(Rao 2012, 249)

This creates a role reversal with the narrator taking on the paternal role for Ashutosh's own son, Aakash. Grewal and Kaplan (2001) have argued that focus on the family has been a problematic yet important area within sexuality studies. They have argued that whilst the family is an important consideration, it should not be the only site for subject production. This emphasis on the family as a universal category both heteronormatizes queer sites of production and also dislocates any alternative non

patriarchal family structures. However Rao has added a second point to consider, namely class. When class comes within consideration of such analyses, it takes a turn of exploitation.

At the time of parting, Ashutosh asked for money again. I was speechless. A wave of pity engulfed me as I went to the cupboard. If a young man could be reduced to this. . .

Categories such as polyamority, adultery and non-normative family structures are a part of the queer spectrum as Rao has himself argued in an interview with Kuhu Sharma Chanana:

Adultery and deception . . .are very queer and non-normative issues, and are actually advocated by queer theory. Monogamy and fidelity which are required by marriage. . . have very much to do with heteronormativity. (2012, 137)

The two texts, seemingly different, move beyond oppression and seek redemption. They have broken the silent monolith surrounding queer sexualities in South Asia and have been traitorous to use Halberstam's word by uncovering and representing the "queerness within the queer" which neo-liberalism has been homonormativising for the last few years. In constituting national identities they have placed the queer firmly within the discourse of nationalism. They have tried to construct a new postcolonial queer identity that is neither uncritically Western nor an unimaginative regression to traditional practices. The queer space of home is ruptured in these texts and is a challenge to the dominant ideologies of community based on ethnicity and class and nationhood. The formulation of queerness and queer identities forces the home space to be remoulded and remade by queer desire and subjectivity in non-heteronormative ways.

It can be observed that these texts serve to link and unlink the queer bodies enacting the erasure of native naturalised sexual performance identity with the alternative gender and sexual role as the bodies enter an area of performativity that works on de-essentialising the embodiment. Negotiating between different genders and sexual identities is also about negotiating various positions of power. These texts capture this process of destabilisation of identity addressing the shifting boundaries of sex, sexuality, gender and power and in the process questioning the intensely precarious borderlines of heteronormative patriarchal stereotypes.

## **Critiquing the neo-liberal agenda: Queer kinships and Gaga sexualities**

On more than one occasion, I have heard stories from queer friends applying for immigration in the UK having to fill in long forms which have required them to tick gay for their sexual orientation (in the absence of anything more fluid, namely queer). This essentialising of sexuality as a binary between straight and gay not only limits the individual's own identity constructs but also services neo-liberalism. Whilst the acceptance and consciousness of homosexuality by the State is a cause célèbre, especially within a Tatchell-ian form of queer politics, what is troubling is the recognition and negotiation of a queer identity within a rigid system of "blocks, taboos and prohibitions" (Halberstam, 2012, 9). Gaga feminism/sexuality already exists (albeit not in that name) in different forms. This "brand" of feminism is not about "motherhood, sisterhood, sorority or even women" (*ibid.*, 29). In a fierce critique of feminists such as Susan Faludi who are committed to a reform model of feminism, and to the idea of feminism as a politics built around stable definitions of (white) womanhood and as a ladies' club of influence and moral dignity, Halberstam posits Gaga feminism as random acts by "gaga" people who are improvising revolution and reimagining, shifting and questioning political positions. Lady Gaga here is merely the locus around which such revolutionary acts can take place. As Halberstam writes:

gaga feminism will locate Lady Gaga as merely the most recent marker of the withering away of old social models of desire, gender, and sexuality, and as a channel for potent new forms of relation, intimacy, technology, and embodiment. (2012, 25)

Faludi finds her Indian counterpart within nationalists (read Hindutva) such as Dayananda Saraswati, the Hindu reformist and founder of the Arya Samaj who called upon upper class women (descendants of Aryan women) to take part in the nationalist struggle and get actively involved in social reform movements such as female education, widow remarriage, and so on. He asks them to leave their babies with the wet nurses and start working for the greater cause but in doing so he leaves the subaltern women (the wet nurses) completely outside the nationalist agenda, completely ignoring their need for social and national commitment. By analysing the works of orientalists and nationalists, Uma Chakravarti (1989) asks why the subaltern women are absent in the recreation of their glorious history. She states that in the orientalist discourses, from Colebrooke to Max Mueller, the subaltern woman is always missing and

non-existent; the Vedic Devi, the upper class, upper caste Aryan woman emerges as the bearer of India's glorious past but the subaltern Vedic Dasi does not feature anywhere. The Indian nationalists by and large fell into the same trap. In search of India's glorious pre-colonial past, the Vedic Dasi was cast into oblivion. Orientalist and nationalist discourses would have her disappear forever from the chapters of India's history. These classist and patriarchal discourses gave impetus for the later hegemonic and fractured ideology of nationalism which also left the majority of Indian women outside its discursive parameters.

As Chakrabarti and Halberstam have observed, normalcy and state based identity is conferred upon those who are recognised by their class, racial, gender and sexual statuses. By choosing to delimit queer identities within a homonormative paradigm, the very politics of "unruly identities" is being shaken. Rao's "Crocodile Tears" constructs a new form of queer kinship, where identities and relationships are destabilised and queered beyond just their sexual identity and herein lies the future of queer politics—recovering the politics from the neo-liberalism.

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