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AUTHOR INTERVIEW



LGBT Writer and Gay-rights Activist R. Raj Rao in conversation with Angita Ram V.

ABSTRACT:

This is an interview transcript of an e-mail interview taken on 6th November 2016, with LGBT writer and gay-rights activist **R. Raj Rao**, (who is credited for writing one of the first gay novels in English in India) and for pioneering the Queer studies circle in Indian academia. In the following interview, Dr. R. Raj Rao speaks on gender and sexual minorities in India, his contribution to LGBT literature, and the current condition and future of Queer Studies Circle in academia.

KEYWORDS:

Interview, LGBT, queer studies circle, gay rights.

INTRODUCTION:

R. Raj Rao pioneered the queer studies circle in Indian academia and is credited for introducing LGBT literature as a course at the university level amidst opposition. His novel, *The Boyfriend* (2003) is one among the first gay novels written in English in India. Apart from being a writer, poet and teacher of literature, he is one among a handful of India's leading gay-rights activists and is one of the few writers in India who has contributed significantly to LGBT literature.

Rao one of the openly-gay writers in India, received his PhD in English Literature from the University of Bombay, and pursued his post-doctoral studies from the University of Warwick and is also a recipient of Quebec-India awards. Apart from *Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorized Biography* (2000) he is the author of the following works *Slide Show* (1992, poems), *The Wisest Fool on Earth and Other Plays* (1996) *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City* (2001, short stories), *The Boyfriend* (2003, novel), *Whistling in the Dark: Twenty-One Queer Interviews* (2009), *Hostel Room 131* (2010, novel), that deal with queer subjects. Poems from his *BomGay* collection also served as the source for Riyad Wadia's 1996 film *Bomgay*, credited to be India's first gay film.

Angita Ram (AR): Could you please elaborate on when did you start writing and how did you start writing?

R. Raj Rao (RR): I started writing a long time ago. I guess I felt I had something to say that readers in India had not heard before. That's how it all started.

AR: Who are your target readers and what kind of response have you received from them?

RR: I have no target readers as such. Anyone who is attracted to my work is free to read it. However, having said that, I am aware that we live in a world of niche readership. My niche readership, obviously, is gay readers and readers of alternative literature. And I have received much praise from them.

AR: Do you find yourself venturing into writings that you might have shied away from, in your early days of writing? How do you trace the trajectories of your work from the initial ones to the latest *Lady Lolita's Lover* (2016)?

RR: *Lady Lolita's Lover* is different from my other fiction in that it begins as a heterosexual love story (Sandesh and Lolita) of which I have no experience. The gay story of Sandesh and J. R. emerges only in the latter half of the novel, and it is more about love than about sex. I have also written a few short stories with a lesbian theme. This was a challenge. I told myself that if I was unable to do this, I was not worth my ink as a writer. I think I met the challenge quite well.

AR: How problematic, challenging, and uplifting is it being a civil rights activist for gay rights in India?

RR: Actually, I'm not much of a civil rights or gay rights activist. I'm fundamentally a writer and an academic. What activism I have done comes through in my writing. But the point of view in literature can be deceptive, for literature is not propaganda. In so much of my writing I laugh at myself and at others like me. It's called self-deprecatory

humour. This would never do for activism. Thus, gay activists usually do not like my work. The playwright Vijay Tendulkar said about himself: "The writer in me is more analytical rather than socially committed one way or the other. The writer in me raises inconvenient questions instead of choosing his side and passionately claiming...that it is always the right one. As a social being I am against all exploitation...as a writer I am fascinated by the violent exploiter-exploited relationship and obsessively delve deep into it instead of taking a position against it."

AR: You have pioneered queer studies circle in academia and is credited for introducing LGBT literature as a course in the university in spite of opposition. As an academic discipline, do you think lesbian and gay studies should maintain structural links and dialogue with the communities that generated the political and social conditions for its existence? Apart from addressing the deep needs for understanding identity and sexuality, how do you think lesbian and gay studies can contribute to more tolerant generations?

RR: If feminist and gender studies can do this for women's rights, LGBT studies can similarly do this for the rights of sexual minorities. In both cases, an academic discipline leads to awareness. The status quoist thinking of people changes when we are able to theorize about an issue. This in turn leads to greater understanding and tolerance.

AR: What do you think could be the new directions in LGBT and queer research in Indian universities and what is needed to advance theory, research methods, and educational practice?

RR: LGBT research in Indian universities is still in its nascent stages. Because the research has to do with sexuality and sexual identity, students, who are essentially of a conservative mindset, shy away from it. Then there is the problem of not having enough qualified supervisors to guide the research. It's a vicious circle. Professors, like students, also have conservative mindsets that they acquired when they were students. This keeps them from exploring new areas of academic learning. Of course, things may be slowly changing. Sexuality studies uses gender studies as an alibi, and today there are courses offered in universities, and even in colleges at the undergraduate level, on gender and sexuality studies combined. But the focus here tends to be on gender, with inadequate attention paid to sexuality. I once said that sexuality matters need to secede from the union of identity markers, made up of caste, class, race and gender together with it. The latter have an air of academic respectability about them, but the former has not, for obvious reasons.

AR: How do the notions of caste and class intersect with the notion of alternative sexuality? What about double subordination- as in the case of Milind in *The Boyfriend* (2003) who is a Dalit and gay?

RR: I have partly answered this question above. *The Boyfriend* angered some of my Dalit readers because they claimed that gayness wasn't an issue among Dalits. They thought that by making Milind a Dalit, I had sinned against them, had committed a travesty. What they do not wish to acknowledge is that gayness is as marginalizing as caste, regardless of whether a person is upper or lower class. In fact, we are worse off than

women or Dalits because Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code makes us criminals. And people's sympathies don't lie with criminals.

AR: Does space play a key role in your works in which most significant incidents take place, (as in some of the chapter titles of *The Boyfriend*)?

RR: Yes, of course, because we in the 20th century have learned to write in the modernist tradition. There has to be a distinct sense of locale to the fiction. Most of my fiction is set in the city of Bombay, in which I was born, raised and educated. It's a city I know better than any other city in the world, although I have been living and working in Poona for close to 30 years. But hardly any of my work is set in Poona. Bombay remains the city of my soul, or soul-city.

AR: Your collection of poems has been adapted for the screen (*Bomgay*, 1996), and has received ample response. How do you perceive the interpretation of your literary work using the medium of cinema that conveys what has been said through words using movies. What is your stand on your literary works being adapted to the screen, do you think the reachability of cinema can offer the possibility of a powerful tool in generating space for LGBT communities in India?

RR: I think every writer wants his work to be filmed, because films are the medium of
the

21st century and have a wider reach. Few writers, however, are lucky. Very few Indian novels in English, save for the novels of Chetan Bhagat, have been made into movies. *BomGay* was a ten minute short experimental film, not a film in the real sense. A

maverick Bombay-based filmmaker has acquired the rights of *The Boyfriend* but is stuck for lack of finance from a producer.

AR: You have co-translated *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) into English which was initially transcribed in Marathi by Vaishali Rode on behalf of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. How was your experience translating a text that has already undergone a translation, taking into account the power and role of translation in articulating otherness for pan-Indian readers?

RR: The Marathi version of *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* was not a translation. It was a transcription, because Vaishali Rode wrote it exactly as Laxmi spoke to her, and if you know Laxmi, you know how much she rambles. She can hardly have a focused conversation. Our English translation of Laxmi's book is a literary account of her life that needed much editing, re-structuring and dramatizing on our part. It definitely gives a more logical account of Laxmi's life to pan-Indian readers, as you put it, than Laxmi herself would ever be capable of doing.

AR: What are you working on at the moment?

RR: I am working on a new novel and some new poems. A book of mine entitled *Formulations: Queer Theory, Culture and Politics* will soon be out from Sage. There is also a new edition of my *Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorized Biography* that will come out early next year, after a gap of 17 years.

AR: Any advice to aspiring authors writing LGBTQ literature, characters?

RR: Follow your instincts and write without fear of the repercussions. Don't allow homophobia to mar your work. The written word is magical because it confers instant respectability on us. Today, the world may hate Oscar Wilde and Jean Genet for their sexual orientation, but it loves, admires and adores them for their literature.

Angita Ram V. is pursuing PhD in Translation Studies from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Her primary research goals are directed towards tracing how characters are translated across semiotic systems taking into account gender as one of the important aspects. Her key areas of research interests involve Translation Studies, Film Studies and Gender Studies.

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