

**Queer Loves, Queer Spaces:
Reading Spatiality in Contemporary Indian
'Gay Romance' Novels in English**

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Submitted by

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “**Queer Loves, Queer Spaces: Reading Spatiality in Contemporary Indian ‘Gay Romance’ Novels in English**” submitted by me towards the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy (Arts) in English** of Jadavpur University, Kolkata is based upon my own original work carried out under the supervision of **Dr Kaustav Bakshi**, Assistant Professor, Department of English and that there is no plagiarism. This is also to certify that the work has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree/diploma of the same Institution where the work is carried out, or to any other Institution. A paper out of this dissertation has also been presented by me at a conference at the Department of English – Centre of Advanced Study (CAS), Jadavpur University, thereby fulfilling the criteria for submission, as per the M.Phil. Regulations (2017) of Jadavpur University.

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On the basis of academic merit and satisfying all the criteria as declared above, the dissertation of Mr **Anil Pradhan** entitled “**Queer Loves, Queer Spaces: Reading Spatiality in Contemporary Indian ‘Gay Romance’ Novels in English**” is now ready for submission towards the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy (Arts) in English** of Jadavpur University.

Head

Department of English

Supervisor & Convener of RAC

Member of RAC

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SYNOPSIS

Research concerning human sexuality has yielded phenomenal studies and theories in ‘Western’ academic discourses. In contrast, developments in the field of queer and sexuality studies in Indian academia have only recently (precisely in the mid-1990s) begun interrogating complex questions in this context. Given the dire implications of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that indirectly criminalised homosexuality in India until very recently, critical investments in the study of the issues concerning LGBTQ+ individuals have become an important need of the hour.

LGBTQ+ literature and writing in India has witnessed an ‘explosion’ in the past two decades and the trends in contemporary publication promise consistent growth in the future too. Critical anthropological/ethnographic/sociological/socio-legal/epidemiological works have also been conducted and published by Jeremy Seabrook, Suparna Bhaskaran, Sherry Joseph, Gayatri Reddy, Arvind Narrain, Gautam Bhan, Parmesh Shahani, Alok Gupta, Naisargi N. Dave, akshay khanna, Rohit K. Dasgupta, Debanuj Dasgupta, Pawan Dhall, Shraddha Chatterjee, Ketki Ranade, and Yeshwant Naik.

However, in the context of literary research in Indian academia, there is a serious dearth of critical investigations on the representation of queer lives in literature and, subsequently, on the relevance of such literature in furthering the formation of a sustainable canon that reflects upon such issues. With the exception of a handful of works by Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, Binda Bose, Subhabrata Bhattacharyya, Oliver Ross, Giti Thadani, Akhil Katyal, R. Raj Rao, Madhavi Menon and Kaustav Bakshi, there has not been much significant research output on the ‘queer’ literatures and cultures of/in India. Therefore, issues of queer representation in existing literature, and especially contemporary literature, need to

be invested in, for literature is a key marker of society's outlook and reception of such sensitive subjects as homosexuality and queerness.

Issues, Structure and Objectives:

This project invests in a critical analysis of texts in English that portray and problematise 'gay romance' in contemporary India. It primarily deals with the representation of 'queer' love between men in examples of contemporary India gay literature,¹ specifically novels and novellas, in English. I consider the term 'queer' to posit a heterogeneous and non-monolithic idea of non-normative and non-conformist sexualities and their discourses and praxes. The project involves the analysis of a majority of contemporary novels dealing with 'gay romance' as such:

1. R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2003)
2. R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131* (2010)
3. Anjali Joseph's *Saraswati Park* (2010)
4. Mayur Patel's *Vivek and I* (2010)
5. Arun Mirchandani's *You Are Not Alone* (2010)
6. Janice Pariat's *Seahorse* (2014)
7. R. Raj Rao's *Lady Lolita's Lover* (2015)
8. Sahil Sood's *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn* (2016)
9. Vicky Arora's *Terminal Love* (2016)
10. Akash Mehrotra's *The Other Guy* (2017)

[Note: For a basic idea about the plot of the novels and novellas included in this study, refer to Appendix A for the synopses of the primary texts.]

¹ I restrict my analysis to male same-sex love and desire; partly as a matter of specific interest, but also to avoid a conflation of two distinctive sex-gender politics.

The project critically interrogates how contemporary issues pertaining to homosexual romance in India get represented through and narrativised in such examples of LGBTQ+ English-language literature in India. In doing so, the project specifically deals with the aspect of ‘queer spaces’ and the themes in and the politics of the construction, the representation, and the problematisation of spatiality in contemporary ‘gay romance’ fiction. In the context of interrogating and analysing ‘queer spaces’ and the politics of spatiality vis-à-vis ‘gay romance’ in such novels, four key themes/issues will be focussed upon in four separate chapters as such:

- public urban spaces
- private spaces
- rural spaces and travels in nature
- ‘other’ spaces – virtual, strategic, memory

While questioning how such literary representations reflect upon queer negotiations for love and relationships located in space, the study opens up discussions related to the rise of such literature in times of the Section 377 debate and their contributions towards primary formulations of ‘gay romance’ in contemporary India. Additionally, it also aims to read how this ‘gay romance’ queers the genre of the ‘love story.’

Research Question:

- How have ‘queer spaces’ and queer spatial politics and negotiations been intersectionally narrativised, re-presented, and problematised in contemporary Indian English-language ‘gay romance’ novels?

Methodology:

The primary research method consists of a qualitative approach towards interpreting the texts and analysing them in the light of contemporary literary criticism related to queer studies, complemented by relevant historical and socio-cultural materials. The study focuses upon the specific politics in 'gay romance' employed to address and locate a 'queer' idea of love in space in contemporary India. Given the dearth of specific and relevant literary criticism, the research also theorises upon the specificities of the queering of love and spaces of romance in these 'Indian' novels in English.

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Prologue

THE 'LITERARY FIELD' OF QUEER 'CULTURAL PRODUCTION' IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: READING A 'GAY ROMANCE' TEXT VIA BOURDIEU

Popular Indian fiction writer Durjoy Datta's novel *Our Impossible Love* (2016) portrays a narrative of heterosexual romance, but unlike his other 16 novels, it presents a character who is not only gay but who also plays a major role in the positive denouement of the plot. Additionally, Datta presents to his readership a narrative about the struggles of a gay character and his own share of romance, culminating in a happy ending of sorts. To have a popular romance writer who presents an alternative view on romance beside(s) the heterosexual 'given' to the established groups of readership nationwide, according to me, marks a key shift – a turn – in the production and consumption of literature in contemporary India in terms of sexualities and 'queer'-ness.

In terms of the research aimed at the location of literary cultures within the socio-politico-legal milieu of contemporary LGBTQ+ issue in India, such a text presents a curious entry point to an understanding of how location, and locate-ability, is influenced by the existing dynamicity of culture. In its own individual way, it challenges and transforms ideas of literary relevance and reception vis-à-vis the implicit politics of literary production and creativity. However, it must not be simply considered a one-off example of introducing a 'queer' narrative within the larger scheme of establishing a sustainable literary discourse on queer sexualities. Rather, considering such a text where readers are provided with an access to a 'queer' narrative in conspicuous ways presents to the analysis of literature an opportunity to delve into what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the field of cultural production.' As a prologue to

the dissertation's discussion on 'gay romance' fiction in contemporary India, this section considers *Our Impossible Love* as a 'gay romance' text via Bourdieu's framework on how culture is produced, in order to interrogate, contextualise, and explicate the cultural production of a queer literary domain in contemporary India.

Queer 'Positions,' 'Position-takings,' and 'Possibles'

The construction of the spaces of 'positions' and 'position-takings' with respect to the field of cultural production, per Bourdieu, is implied within the interactions (and struggles) between the different positions that constitute any particular field.² In the field of production of literature located within the cultural locale of how fiction influences and affects socio-cultural readings of realities, the 'position' of representing queer identities, experiences, and cultures can be considered to be complicit in and furthered by the 'position-taking' employed by writers that aims at situating a legitimate and legible discourse of homosexuality and queer-ness within and through such a literary text, as Datta's, mass-produced for and circulated in the market.

In the context of the publication of 'queer' texts in contemporary India, the 'newcomers' can situate themselves in a more positive and sustainable position of re-interpreting queer cultures by virtue of their utilisation of a field of cultural production. This, as Bourdieu points out, gets executed through a process of "appropriating the form of thought and expression by which [the cultural field was] formerly possessed."³ This strategic appropriation is made effective, in Datta's case, through an insertion of same-sex romantic possibilities in the construct of the heterosexual romance genre. The extent of this form of

² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 30.

³ *Ibid.*

transformative appropriation and re-presentation located within an equally transformed genre is reflected in what Bourdieu claims regarding the changes in the spaces of literary possibles as such:

[...] change in the space of literary or artistic possibles is the result of change in the *power relation* which constitutes the space of positions. When a new literary or artistic group makes its presence felt in the field of literary or artistic production, the whole *problem* is transformed, since coming into being, i.e., into *difference*, modifies and displaces the universe of possible options [...].⁴

Three issues are of importance in the context of my discussion: power relation, problem, and difference. In terms of the power relations that constitute the space of the positions in the field of contemporary queer literary production in India, I am interested in the literary currency that Datta's text has in transforming the problem, vis-à-vis the projection of a different legitimacy within the market of dominant heteronormative representation.

Given that *Our Impossible Love* has entered into the existing literary field of the romance genre that it subscribes to and refashions, and also given that it has been published and marketed by a player like Penguin Books India – one of the first to initiate a series of publication of 'LGBTQ+' literature in the past three decades,⁵ the implications of Bourdieu's insinuations in terms of power relations become the more problematic. Leaving aside the issues of the contemporary popular preference of such writers as Datta and the competitive domination of such publishing houses as Penguin, the very fact that such 'queer' texts and narratives have been made available to the mainstream market for ready consumption, reception, criticism, and appraisal is symptomatic of a discursive politics of framing and consolidating a field of market-able 'queer'-ness – a definitive space of possibles/positions.

⁴ Ibid., 32; emphases added.

⁵ In relation to Hoshang Merchant's now-iconic 1999 anthology titled *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India*, also published by Penguin Books, R. Raj Rao informs that "no mainstream Indian publisher had previously dared to bring out a compilation of gay writing with the taboo word 'gay' in the title itself." R. Raj Rao, *Criminal Love?: Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics in India* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2017), 64.

When considered in the backdrop of the regressive 2013 Supreme Court of India judgement, the publication of such texts, as Datta's, seems more than just co-incidental. Nor is coincidental the fact that there has been a considerable increase and proliferation in the publication of 'queer' literary texts in English in and about India in the past two decades (refer to Figs. 1.1-1.6 below where I have provided a non-exhaustive timeline of the publication of 200 'queer' literary texts, from 1981 till March 2019, that deal with LGBTQ+ issues and experiences in major and/or minor ways).⁶

⁶ The dates of publication have been provided as per the dates made available on www.amazon.in and corroborated through a search on www.isbnsearch.org in cases of dispute.

Fig. 1.1: A non-exhaustive timeline of ‘queer’ literary texts (in English) published in and about India [1981 – 2019 (Mar)]

- 1981
- *Mappings* (Vikram Seth, 1981, Writers Workshop)
 - *The Humble Administrator’s Garden* (Vikram Seth, Oct. 1985, Carcanet Press)
 - *Neither Man Nor Woman: Hijras of India* (Seema Nanda, 07.12.1989, Wadsworth)
 - *Trying to Grow* (Firdaus Kanga, 30.04.1990, Penguin)
 - *Bravely Fought the Queen* (Mahesh Dattani, 02.08.1991, Penguin)
 - *Less than Gay: A Citizens’ Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India* (ABVA, Dec. 1991)
 - *The Dew Drop Inn* (Leslie de Noronha, Dec. 1994, Writers Workshop)
 - *Hem and Maxine* (Nalinaksha Bhattacharya, 28.09.1995, Jonathan Cape)
 - *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* (Zia Jaffrey, 05.11.1996, Pantheon)
 - *Shiva and Arun* (P. Parivaraj, 29.06.1998, Gay Men’s Press)
 - *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (Mahesh Dattani, 23.11.1998, [2000, Penguin])
 - *Third Sex And Human Rights* (Rajesh Talwar, 01.01.1999, Gyan Publishing)
 - *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* (Ed. Hoshang Merchant, 01.01.1999, Penguin)
 - *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (Ed. Ashwini Sukhthankar, 28.01.1999, Penguin)
 - *Love in a Different Climate: Men Who Have Sex with Men in India* (Jeremy Seabrook, 17.07.1999, Verso)
 - *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (Mahesh Dattani, 06.08.1999, [2000, Penguin])
 - *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Indian Literature and History* (Ed. Ruth Vanita & Saleem Kidwai, 07.07.2000, Palgrave Macmillan)
 - *Hijra* (Ash Kotak, 01.11.2000, Oberon Books)
- 2001
- *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City* (R. Raj Rao, 04.06.2001, HarperCollins)
 - *Mitrachi Goshta: A Friend’s Story: A Play in Three Acts* (Vijay Tendulkar, Trans. Gowri Ramnarayan, 31.07.2001, Oxford UP)
 - *Queering India: Same-Sex Love And Eroticism In Indian Culture And Society* (Ed. Ruth Vanita, 16.11.2001, Routledge)
 - *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Dayanita Singh & Mona Ahmed, 17.11.2001, Scalo)
 - *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore* (Devdutt Pattanaik, 01.12.2001, Taylor & Francis)
 - *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality* (Jyoti Puri, 27.02.2002, Routledge)
 - *A Married Woman* (Manju Kapoor, 01.12.2002, Roli)
 - *The Boyfriend* (R. Raj Rao, 14.03.2003, Penguin)
 - *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia* (Ed. Sanjay Srivastava, 01.01.2004, SAGE)
 - *Queer: Despised Sexuality Law And Social Change* (Arvind Narrain, 04.03.2004, Books for Change)
 - *Sexuality in the Time of AIDS: Contemporary Perspectives from Communities in India* (Ed. Ravi K. Verma, Pertti J. Pelto, Stephen L. Schensul & Archana Joshi, 01.05.2004, SAGE)
 - *Made In India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects* (Suparna Bhaskaran, 11.11.2004, Palgrave Macmillan)
 - *Hijras: The Labelled Deviants* (S. K. Sharma, 01.12.2004, Gyan Publishing House)
 - *Madras on Rainy Days: A Novel* (Samina Ali, 01.01.2005, Picador)
 - *Social Work Practice and Men who have Sex with Men* (Sherry Joseph, 01.05.2005, SAGE)
 - *Babyji* (Abha Dawesar, 25.05.2005, Penguin)
 - *With Respect to Sex – Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Gayatri Reddy, 02.08.2005, University of Chicago Press)

Fig. 1.2: A non-exhaustive timeline of ‘queer’ literary texts (in English) published in and about India [1981 – 2019 (Mar)]

- *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia* (Ed. Geetanjali Misra & Radhika Chandiramani, 01.09.2005, SAGE)
- *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia* (Ed. Geetanjali Misra & Radhika Chandiramani, 01.09.2005, SAGE)
- *Love’s Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (Ruth Vanita, 20.10.2005, Penguin)
- *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Gayatri Gopinath, Dec. 2005, Seagull)
- *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India* (Comp. Maya Sharma, 02.02.2006, Yoda)
- *Chocolate, and Other Writings on Male-Male Desire* (Pandey Bechan Sharma ‘Ugra,’ Trans. Ruth Vanita, 28.09.2006, Oxford UP)
- *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (Ed. Arvind Narrain & Gautam Bhan, 30.10.2006, Yoda)
- *Gandhi’s Tiger and Sita’s Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Culture* (Ruth Vanita, 01.12.2006, Yoda)
- *The Phobic And The Erotic: The Politics Of Sexualities In Contemporary India* (Ed. Brinda Bose & Subhabrata Bhattacharyya, 01.01.2007, SAGE)
- *Sexualities: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism* (Ed. Nivedita Menon, 19.06.2007, Women Unlimited)
- *Kari* (Amruta Patil, 22.01.2008, HarperCollins)
- *Forbidden Sex, Forbidden Texts: New India’s Gay Poets* (Ed. Hoshang Merchant, 01.02.2008, Routledge)
- *New Life: Selected Stories* (Vijay Dan Detha, 13.02.2008, Penguin)
- *Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and Belonging in Contemporary India* (Parmesh Shahani, 14.03.2008, SAGE)
- *Whistling in the Dark: Twenty-one Queer Interviews* (Ed. R. Raj Rao & Dibyajyoti Sarma, 20.11.2008, SAGE)
- *Past Continuous* (Neel Mukherjee, 16.01.2009, Picador)
- *The Lost Flamingoes of Bombay* (Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi, 10.02.2009, Penguin)
- *Forbidden Sex, Forbidden Texts: New India’s Gay Poets* (Hoshang Merchant, 09.03.2009, Routledge)
- *The Strike* (Anand Mahadevan, 22.05.2009, Penguin)
- *First Love* (Brinda Charry, 03.06.2009, HarperCollins)
- *Eunuch Park: Fifteen Stories of Love and Destruction* (Palash Krishna Mehrotra, 08.06.2009, Penguin)
- *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Anjali R. Arondekar, 15.09.2009, Duke UP)
- *Delhi Noir* (Ed. Hirsh Sawhney, 25.09.2009, HarperCollins)
- *Leaving India: My Family’s Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents* (Minal Hajratwala, 09.11.2009, Tranquebar)
- *Electric Feather: The Tranquebar Book Of Erotic Stories* (Ed. Ruchir Joshi, Dec. 2009, Tranquebar)
- *Wish You Were Here: Memories Of A Gay Life* (Sunil Gupta, Dec. 2009, Yoda)
- 2010 • *Love And Longing In Bombay* (Vikram Chandra, 12.03.2010, Penguin)
- *Quarantine* (Rahul Mehta, 01.04.2010, Random House)
- *You Are Not Alone* (Arun Mirchandani, 04.05.2010, Leadstart)



Fig. 1.3: A non-exhaustive timeline of ‘queer’ literary texts (in English) published in and about India [1981 – 2019 (Mar)]

- *Hostel Room 131* (R. Raj Rao, 05.07.2010, Penguin)
- *The Truth about Me* (A. Revathi, Trans. V. Geetha, 10.07.2010, Penguin)
- *Saraswati Park* (Anjali Joseph, 15.07.2010, HarperCollins)
- *Exploring Queer Identity* (Amey Kolhe & Imran Ali Khan, Dec. 2010, Queer Ink)
- *Vivek & I* (Mayur Patel, 08.12.2010, Penguin)
- *The Last Pretence: A Novel* (Srivatsu Sarayu, 09.12.2010, HarperCollins)
- *The Dead Camel and Others Stories of Love* (Parvati Sharma, 22.12.2010, Zubaan)
- *Feminist Visions and Queer Futures in Postcolonial Drama: Community, Kinship, and Citizenship* (Kanika Batra, 06.01.2011, Routledge)
- *Fire: A Queer Film Classic* (Shohini Ghosh, 13.01.2011, Arsenal Pulp)
- *Blue Blood* (Uttara Chauhan, 14.01.2011, Penguin)
- *Jamali-Kamali: A Tale of Passion in Mughal India* (Karen Chase, 15.01.2011, Grantha)
- *Perfectly Untraditional* (Sweta Srivastava Vikram, 29.03.2011, Niyogi)
- *Queer* (Sunil Gupta, 01.04.2011, Prestel)
- *Ninny's Natter* (Ninad Jog, 10.05.2011, Createspace Independent)
- *A Married Woman* (Manju Kapur, 21.06.2011, Faber & Faber)
- *Law Like Love: Queer Perspectives on Law* (Ed. Arvind Narrain & Alok Gupta, 01.07.2011, Yoda)
- *The Exiles* (Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla, 05.07.2011, HarperCollins)
- *Miss Timmin's School For Girls* (Nayana Currimbhoy, 05.07.2011, HarperCollins)
- *Pink Sheep* (Mahesh Natarajan, 04.08.2011, Gyaana)
- *The Man Who Would Be Queen: Autobiographical Fictions* (Hoshang Merchant, 18.11.2011, Penguin)
- *Blue Boy* (Rakesh Satyal, Dec. 2011, India Ink)
- *For Hire* (R. Raj Rao, 01.01.2012, Paperwall)
- *The More I Desired...* (Pradeep Atrey, 22.01.2012, Uttkarsh Publication)
- *Travails of Entrapment* (Himadri Roy, 08.02.2012, Leadstart)
- *Mumbai Noir* (Ed. Altaf Tyrewala, 05.03.2012, HarperCollins)
- *Six Metres of Pavement* (Farzana Doctor, 18.04.2012, Rupa)
- *My Magical Palace* (Kunal Mukherjee, 18.05.2012, HarperCollins)
- *Stealing Nasreen* (Farzana Doctor, 24.05.2012, Rupa)
- *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Naisargi N. Dave, 08.10.2012, Duke UP)
- *Close, Too Close: The Tranquebar Book of Queer Erotica* (Ed. Meenu & Shruti, 21.10.2012, Tranquebar)
- *Alchemy: The Tranquebar Book of Erotic Stories II* (Ed. Sheba Karim, 20.11.2012, Tranquebar)
- *Our Lives Our Words: Telling Aravani Lifestories* (A. Revathi, 01.12.2012, Yoda)
- *Out!: Stories from the New Queer India* (Ed. Minal Hajratwala, Dec. 2012, Queer Ink)
- *The Green Rose* (Sharmila Mukherjee, 11.12.2012, Penguin)
- *Seeing Like a Feminist* (Nivedita Menon, 17.12.2012, Penguin)
- *A People Stronger: The Collectivization of MSM and TG groups in India* (Suneeta Singh, Sangita Dasgupta, Pallav Patankar & Minati Sinha, 24.12.2012, SAGE)
- *The City of Devi* (Manil Suri, 01.01.2013, Bloomsbury)
- *How I Got Lucky* (Farhad J. Dadyburjor, 01.03.2013, Random House)
- *Cobalt Blue* (Sachin Kundalkar, Trans. Jerry Pinto, 18.04.2013, Penguin)
- *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (Living Smiling Vidya, 15.07.2013, Rupa)

Fig. 1.4: A non-exhaustive timeline of ‘queer’ literary texts (in English) published in and about India [1981 – 2019 (Mar)]

-
- 2014
- *Love & Death in the Middle Kingdom* (Nalini Rajan, 20.10.2013, Alchemy)
 - *The Sensitive Side of a Gay: Treasured Tales of Tops, Bottoms and Versatiles* (Nirmal, 28.10.2013, Partridge Publishing)
 - *De-Stereotyping Indian Body and Desire* (Ed. Kaustav Chakraborty, 01.12.2013, Cambridge SP)
 - *Gaysia: Adventures in the Queer East* (Benjamin Law, 08.12.2013, Random House)
 - *Masculinity and Its Challenges in India: Essays on Changing Perceptions* (Ed. Rohit K. Dasgupta & K. Moti Gokulsing, 19.12.2013, McFarland)
 - *The Lion and the Antler* (Shaleen Rakesh, 2013, World View)
 - *Gay Subcultures and Literatures: The Indian Projections* (Ed. Sukhbir Singh, 2014, IAS)
 - *Land Where I Flee* (Prajwal Parajuly, 02.01.2014, Quercus)
 - *The Kama Sutra Diaries: Intimate Journeys Through Modern India* (Sally Howard, 23.02.2014, Tranquebar)
 - *India in Love: Marriage and Sexuality in the 21st Century* (Ira Trivedi, 26.02.2014, Aleph)
 - *Ninny Me* (Ninad Jog, 26.03.2014, Createspace)
 - *Aliens on Their Own Planet: Being Gay in a Conservative Society* (Mangala Gouri, 11.04.2014, Createspace)
 - *LGBTQIA India E-Fiction* (Various, 14.04.2014, Queer Ink)
 - *Popular Masculine Cultures in India: Critical Essays* (Ed. Rohit K. Dasgupta & Steven Baker, 05.05.2014, Raj Publications)
 - *Alternate Sexualities in India: The Construction of Queer Culture* (Ana Garca-Arroyo, 01.06.2014, Booksway)
 - *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* (Devdutt Pattanaik, 20.07.2014, Zubaan & Penguin)
 - *The Pregnant King: A Novel* (Devdutt Pattanaik, 07.11.2014, Penguin)
 - *Strange Obsession* (Shobhaa De, 24.11.2014, Penguin)
 - *Seahorse* (Janice Pariat, 01.12.2014, Random House)
 - *Slightly Burnt* (Payal Dhar, 01.12.2014, Bloomsbury)
 - *Talking of Muskann* (Himanjali Sankar, 01.12.2014, Duckbill)
 - *The Boatman: A Memoir of Same-Sex Love* (John Burbidge, 01.12.2014, Yoda)
 - *Don't Let Him Know* (Sandip Roy, 26.01.2015, Bloomsbury)
 - *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, Trans. R. Raj Rao, 01.03.2015, Oxford UP)
 - *LGBTQ: (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) Identities in Select Modern Indian Literature* (Kuhu Sharma Chanana, 02.03.2015, D. K. Print)
 - *Selected Swakanthey: Reflections on Non-Normative Gender-Sexual Issues and Lives* (Ed. Subhagata Ghosh, Mar. 2015, Sappho for Equality)
 - *The Normal State of Mind* (Susmita Bhattacharya, 31.03.2015, Parthian)
 - *Sisters and Lovers* (Nalinaksha Bhattacharya, 17.04.2015, Partridge)
 - *The Devourers* (Indra Das, 11.05.2015, Penguin)
 - *Ladies Coupe* (Anita Nair, 22.06.2015, Penguin)
 - *No Outlaws in the Gender Galaxy* (Chayanika Shah, Raj Merchant, Shals Mahajan & Smriti Nevatia, 24.08.2015, Zubaan)
 - *377* (Manish Jani, 21.09.2015, Notion)
 - *Lady Lolita's Lover* (R. Raj Rao, 23.09.2015, HarperCollins)
 - *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender and Art* (Ed. Sangeeta Datta, Kaustav Bakshi & Rohit K. Dasgupta, 18.11.2015, Routledge)

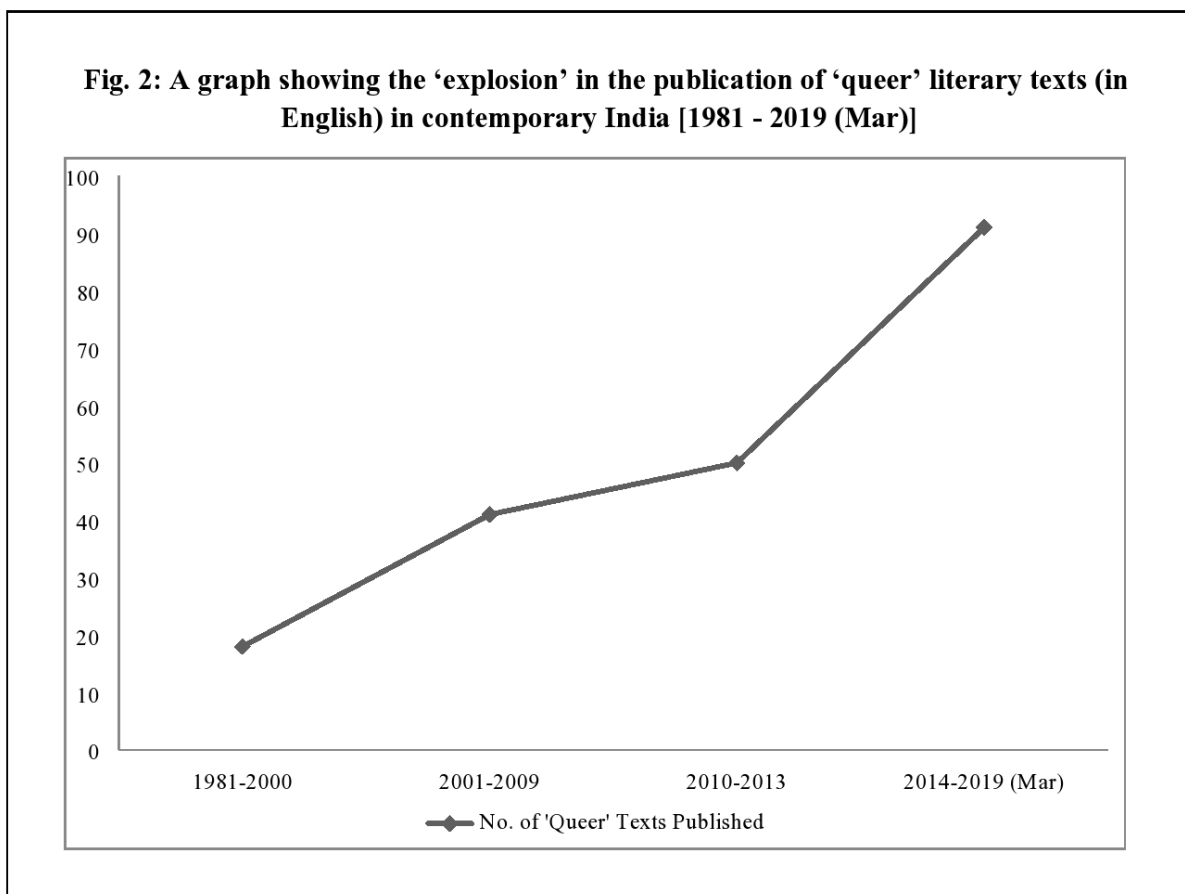
Fig. 1.5: A non-exhaustive timeline of ‘queer’ literary texts (in English) published in and about India [1981 – 2019 (Mar)]

- *Rukhsat: The Departure* (Sujit Banerjee, 18.11.2015, Frog in Well)
- *No One Else: A Personal History of Outlawed Love and Sex* (Siddharth Dube, 01.12.2015, HarperCollins)
- *Nothing to Fix: Medicalisation of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* (Ed. Arvind Narrain & Vinay Chandran, 01.12.2015, SAGE & Yoda)
- *Same-Sex Desire in Indian Culture: Representations in Literature and Film, 1970-2015* (Oliver Ross, 06.01.2016, Palgrave Macmillan)
- *Our Impossible Love* (Durjoy Datta, 15.01.2016, Penguin)
- *Delhi: A Novel* (Khushwant Singh, 02.02.2016, Penguin)
- *Sexual States: Governance and the Struggle over the Antisodomy Law in India* (Jyoti Puri, 25.03.2016, Duke UP)
- *Secret Writings of Hoshang Merchant* (Hoshang Merchant & Akshaya K. Rath, 25.04.2016, Oxford UP)
- *Legendary Mughal Kings: Homosexuality in South Asia* (Subhodeep Mukhopadhyay, 28.06.2016, The Tiny Man)
- *Sexual States: Governance and the Struggle to Decriminalize Homosexuality in India* (Jyoti Puri, 07.07.2016, Orient Longman)
- *She Swiped Right into My Heart* (Sudeep Nagarkar, 21.07.2016, Penguin)
- *A Life in Trans Activism* (A. Revathi, Trans. Nandini Murali, 29.07.2016, Zubaan)
- *Love Bi the Way* (Bhaavna Arora, 02.09.2016, Penguin)
- *Co-Wife* (Pradipta Panda, 14.09.2016, Leadstart)
- *My Sunset Marriage: One Hundred and One Poems* (Hoshang Merchant, 02.10.2016, Navayana)
- *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (Giti Thadani, 06.10.2016, Bloomsbury)
- *Delhi: Communities of Belonging* (Sunil Gupta & Charan Singh, 31.10.2016, The New Press)
- *The Parcel* (Anosh Irani, 11.11.2016, Fourth Estate)
- *Mohanaswamy* (Vasudhendra, Trans. Rashmi Terdal, 22.11.2016, HarperCollins)
- *A Boy Named Khwahish* (Dee Aditya, 01.12.2016, Beaten Track)
- *Terminal Love: A Gutsy Gay Love Story from the Pulsating Heart of Mumbai* (Vicky Arora, 06.12.2016, Kalamos)
- *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn* (Sahil Sood, 12.12.2016, Woven Words)
- *The Doubleness of Sexuality: Idioms of Same-Sex Desire in Modern India* (Akhil Katyal, Dec. 2016, New Text)
- *Sexualness* (akshay khanna, Dec. 2016, New Text)
- *Hijras of Kashmir: A Marginalized Form of Personhood* (Aijaz Ahmad Bund, 2017, Jay Kay)
- *The Audacity of Pleasure : Sexualities, Literature and Cinema in India* (Brinda Bose, 01.01.2017, Three Essays Collective)
- *The Other Guy* (Aakash Mehrotra, 01.01.2017, Leadstart)
- *Murder in Mahim: A Novel* (Jerry Pinto, 12.01.2017, Speaking Tiger)
- *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (Manobi Bandopadhyay & Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, 10.02.2017, Penguin)
- *Digital Queer Cultures in India: Politics, Intimacies and Belonging* (Rohit K. Dasgupta, 15.03.2017, Routledge)
- *Sexuality and Public Space in India: Reading the Visible* (Carmel Christy, 16.03.2017, Routledge)

Fig. 1.6: A non-exhaustive timeline of ‘queer’ literary texts (in English) published in and about India [1981 – 2019 (Mar)]

- *True Liars* (Isha Inamdar, 22.05.2017, Harlequin)
- *The Tree Outside My Window is a Drama Queen* (Avinash Matta, 05.06.2017, Notion)
- *Selection Day: A Novel* (Aravind Adiga, 06.06.2017, Scribner)
- *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (Arundhati Roy, 06.06.2017, Penguin)
- *Gay Indian Love Story* (Adil Khan, 29.06.2017, Createspace)
- *Social Media, Sexuality and Sexual Health Advocacy in Kolkata, India: A Working Report* (Rohit K. Dasgupta & Pawan Dhall, 01.07.2017, Bloomsbury)
- *Cappuccino Confessions* (Anita Kumar, 19.07.2017, Om Books)
- *An Unsuitable Boy* (Karan Johar with Poonam Saxena, 19.08.2017, Penguin)
- *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (Laxmi Nayaran Tripathi, 23.08.2017, Penguin)
- *Bombay Swastika* (Braham Singh, 08.09.2017, Om Books)
- *The Parrots of Desire: 3,000 Years of Indian Erotica* (Ed. Amrita Narayan, 04.09.2017, Aleph)
- *Criminal Love?: Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics in India* (R. Raj Rao, 15.09.2017, SAGE)
- *Queering Digital India: Activisms, Identities, Subjectivities* (Ed. Rohit K. Dasgupta & Debanuj Dasgupta, 22.11.2017, Edinburgh UP)
- *The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Short Stories* (Fiza Pathan, 30.11.2017, Freedom with Pluralism)
- *I Am Divine So Are You: How Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Hinduism Affirm the Dignity of Queer Identities and Sexualities* (Ed. Jerry Johnson, 13.12.2017, HarperCollins)
- *Crocodile Tears: New & Selected Stories* (R. Raj Rao, 01.01.2018, Vishwakarma)
- *Falling Into Place* (Sheryn Munir, 17.01.2018, Ylva Verlag)
- *Eleven Ways to Love: Essays* (Various, 15.02.2018, Penguin)
- *Queer Politics in India: Towards Sexual Subaltern Subjects* (Shraddha Chatterjee, 16.02.2018, Routledge)
- *Lean Days* (Manish Gaekwad, 23.03.2018, HarperCollins)
- *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India* (Madhavi Menon, 10.05.2018, Speaking Tiger)
- *Growing Up Gay in Urban India: A Critical Psychosocial Perspective* (Ketki Ranade, 13.06.2018, Springer)
- *Homosexuality in the Jurisprudence of the Supreme Court of India* (Yeshwant Naik, 25.07.2018, Springer)
- *The Pride March: A Theatrical Journey into the Lives of LGBT* (Eftthikar Ahamed, 01.10.2018, Dattsons)
- *Invisible Men: Inside India's Transmasculine Network* (Nandini Krishnan, 15.11.2018, Penguin)
- *Girls of the Mahabharata: The One Who Had Two Lives* (Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan, 05.12.2018, HarperCollins)
- *My Father's Garden* (Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, 20.12.2018, Speaking Tiger)
- 2019 • *But It's Him I Love* (Salim Rai, 01.01.2019, Notion)
- (Mar) • *Grey - Another Colour of the Rainbow* (Julia Datta, 22.01.2019, independently published)
- *The Scent of God* (Saikat Majumdar, 22.01.2019, Simon and Schuster)
- *Straight to Normal: My Life as a Gay Man* (Sharif Rangnekar, 25.01.2019, Rupa)
- *Queer Studies: Text, Context, Praxis* (Kaustav Bakshi & Rohit K. Dasgupta, 28.03.2019, Orient BlackSwan)

As can be discerned from the non-exhaustive timeline, the surge in the publication of ‘queer’ texts can be observed to have occurred around and during certain periods of time. Given that the ‘literary field’ of cultural production can be related to the cultural realities vis-à-vis contemporary socio-political issues and considerations, the ‘explosion’ in the publication of ‘queer’ texts in the past decade (see Fig. 2 below) can be considered to form and reflect upon the ‘literary field’ of queer cultural production in its formative period.



As mentioned earlier, the graph above pictorially shows the surge in the publication of ‘queer’ texts in contemporary India,⁷ specifically in the period 2014-2019 (Mar). This trend and proliferation in the publication of LGBTQ+-related literature needs to be considered in

⁷ While only 18 ‘queer’ literary texts were published in between 1981 and 2000, the period of 2001-2009 witnessed the publication rate more than double to 41 ‘queer’ literary texts. Subsequently, the period 2010-2013 saw a consistent rise in the rate of publication with 50 ‘queer’ literary texts being published for circulation and consumption in the market. Thereafter, this number again almost doubles to 91 publications in the period 2014-2019 (Mar).

perspective; without claiming that co-occurrence equals to causality, I discuss this proliferation in publication in the context of the major legal events that took place towards challenging Section 377 of the IPC.⁸

What can be considered a period of struggle between 1991 (when AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) initiated the movement to repeal Section 377 by publishing *Less Than Gay: A Citizens' Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India* in December 1991) and July 2009 (when the Delhi High Court passed the historic judgement reading down Section 377), there can be witnessed a considerable rise in the publication of LGBTQ+ literature. After ABVA first filed a petition at the Delhi High Court challenging the constitutionality of Section 377 on 14 April 1994,⁹ publication of LGBTQ+-related texts saw a 3 times increase from that in the preceding decade. In fact, after the NAZ Foundation revived the struggle initiated by ABVA by submitting a civil writ petition to the Delhi High Court challenging Section 377 on 7 December 2001,¹⁰ in the intervening period, publication

⁸ Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), in the context of “Unnatural offences,” states that “[w]hoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.” *Indian Penal Code* (Ministry of Law & Justice, 1860), 88. Though not explicitly stating that the Section refers to same-sex sexual activities, it has been considered and has been used to censure and criminalise homosexual acts, even in private, and subsequently, to criticise, otherwise, and stigmatise individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. Following the long legal struggle, that began in the 1990s, against this Section, Delhi High Court finally read it down on 2 July, 2009 in its judgement on the “Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi and Others” case, effectively decriminalising homosexuality; this is considered a landmark judgement in the history of LGBTQ+ rights movement in India. However, following the Special Leave Petitions filed against the High Court’s judgement, in the “Suresh Kumar Koushal vs. Naz Foundation” case, the reading down of Section 377 was overruled by the Supreme Court of India and homosexuality re-criminalised on 11 December, 2013. As a result of the curative petitions filed against this particular judgement, in the “Navtej Singh Johar & Ors. v. Union of India thr. Secretary Ministry of Law and Justice” case, the Supreme Court overruled the 2013 judgement and decriminalised Section 377 again on 6 September, 2018. For a more detailed history of and discussion on Section 377, see Naisargi N. Dave, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 172-182; Arvind Narrain, “Queer Struggles Around the Law: The Contemporary Context,” in *Sexualities*, ed. Nivedita Menon (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2007), 58-61; Arvind Narrain and Alok Gupta, “Introduction,” in *Law Like Love: Queer Perspectives on Law*, ed. Arvind Narrain and Alok Gupta (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2011), xviii-xxix; R. Raj Rao, *Love*, 127-141; Mrinal Satish, “Decriminalizing Homosexuality: A Review of the Naz Foundation decision of the Delhi High Court,” in *Gay Subcultures and Literatures: The Indian Projections*, ed. Sukhbir Singh (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2014), 267-276.

⁹ See Dave, *Activism*, 173.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, 178.

of 'queer' texts saw an almost 2 times increase from that in the 1994-2001 period. Given that the landmark judgement of Delhi High Court vis-à-vis the unconstitutionality of Section 377 on 2 July, 2009 created huge ripples across the country in terms of sexuality, rights, and freedom, it does not come as a surprise that the fervour was reflected in the literary field too – publication increased by more than 1.5 times in the period that constituted the years after the 'queer'-positive 2009 judgement and before the 'queer'-negative 2013 judgement.

In fact, the proliferation of 'queer' literary publication does not subside but seems to 'explode' to a more than 1.5 times increase after the Supreme Court's judgement on 11 December, 2013 that effectively re-criminalised homosexuality by reviving Section 377, up till the Supreme Court's landmark judgement on 6 September, 2018 that not only reversed the 2013 judgement but also provided a robust defence (in the form of the document of the judgement itself) in support of the queer-positive verdict. As such, the historical events and developments and the literary responses and trends cannot be understood in isolation. Following Bourdieu, the socio-legal realities and elements can, and must, be considered and interrogated correlatively to bring to the fore the underlying politics and processes that have come to develop the 'literary field' of queer 'cultural production' in India in the recent past, as witnessed through the rise and rise of 'queer' literature (in English) in the last two decades.

When considered in relation to this development in the 'literary field' of queer 'cultural production,' it must be noted, then, that texts such as Datta's, with a gay romance sub-plot, are in a bid to 'transform the whole problem,' not just through 'difference' but through a reconciliation of difference into an idea of the 'different' but possible, valid, and sustainable. An idea of queer-positive possibilities and sustainability is stated in the romance fiction of Datta where the narrative saves the ending for the positive note on which the gay couple is accepted by his family and friends. In such a re-presentation of queer 'position-taking,' the different narrative denouement transforms the problem upon its head and paints a

story of ‘possibles,’ where the ‘difference’ is not merely of literary depiction of queer possibilities but implicit in a modification of the normative hetero-romance fiction and a displacement into the field of queer cultural production – where the sub-plot of queer-positive romance presents an alternative form of power relations towards the transformation of the queer problem.¹¹ Evidently, ‘queer’ texts like Datta’s posits, by virtue of being constitutive of a dynamic system of cultural production, the idea of multiplicity. In other words, the queer narrative discourse of such a literary field of cultural production functions within and through an idea of multiple possibles.

The Politics of ‘Hierarchization’ and Queer ‘Literary Legitimacy’

Despite this discourse of multiple possibles, if one is to remember that “the literary and artistic field is contained within the field of power,” the duality in the nature of the relationship between literature and power relations, inadvertently, gets informed by a politics of hierarchy. In this context, Bourdieu’s avers that the structure of the field of production is constitutive of an opposition¹² between the sub-field of ‘restricted production’¹³ and that of

¹¹ Another example of such a ‘queer’-positive ‘position taking’ in relation to contemporary trends in English-language publication in India can be Brinda Bose’s critical commentary on the case of ‘queer’ erotica. In the context of *Close, Too Close: The Tranquebar Book of Queer Erotica* (2012) – the first-ever collection of its kind in India, Bose claims that by virtue of its audacious literary re-presentation of LGBTQ+ lives and experiences, the text partakes in “a form of sociocultural intellectual insurgency” and in the form of its “doubly explosive political intervention,” the volume of ‘queer erotica’ has arrived as a game-changer in the post-377 landscape of queer cultural production. Brinda Bose, *The Audacity of Pleasure: Sexualities, Literature and Cinema in India* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2017), 183. Another example of this alternative and agential ‘queer’-ed *locus standi*, in terms of cultural production, is also reflected in the interesting claim that Shobhna S. Kumar, founder of Queer Ink – India’s first online LGBTQ+ bookstore that itself started publishing ‘queer’ texts in 2010, makes in terms of the publication principles and strategies employed by her ‘queer’ publishing company that I quote at length as such: “On our new website we’ll include [...] that every person, forget LGBT, forget queer, whatever, who is an Indian citizen has certain mandated freedoms and rights and responsibilities as per the Indian constitution. I have a very clear mandating Queer Ink that the Indian Constitution was where I will base our empowerment process. Instead of saying that section 377 is wrong, I will say that the constitution gives us this right. It’s about saying: you have to read this, to understand this, and claim your rights.” Noé Garel, “The Incredible Story of Queer Ink,” *Unmapped*, Issue 18, Mar. 25, 2019.

¹² See Bourdieu, *Field*, 53.

¹³ Popular mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik’s short story titled “The Marriage of Somavat and Sumedha” in *Close, Too Close* provides an example. Through his fictive portrayal of a homoerotic romance between Somavat and

‘large-scale production.’¹⁴ The restrictive principle of hierarchisation not only checks the increase in autonomy of the literary currency of texts like *Our Impossible Love*, but threatens to eventually arrest its efficacy in re-defining the literary field of queer cultural production by virtue of being located within a predominantly heteronorm-informed market politics. Implicit within this problematic is a question of ‘symbolic’ inclusion and exclusion in defining and forming a definitive literary field of queer narratives: to what extent can a particular text with queer narratives/sub-narratives be included in the process of defining that particular genre? For this discussion, I focus on the genre of contemporary romance fiction itself.

In the case of contemporary queer literature in India, how does one locate, and to what extent situate a text such as *Our Impossible Love* by a heterosexual writer such as Durjoy Datta who writes predominantly heterosexual romance fiction? A possible answer to this is situated in the already always present struggle with the binary politics, i.e., as Bourdieu calls it the “struggle for the dominant principle of hierarchization” as such:

The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically [...] and the autonomous principle [...] who are least endowed with specific capital.¹⁵

Now, if one is to consider that the struggle is between the heteronomous principle that constitutes the heteronormative and predominant literature and the autonomous principle that is constituted by/of the non-heteronormative, one would essentially oversimplify the givenness of the dichotomy. However, the line between the two sets of literary production is not

Sumedha, drawn from the tale in *Skanda Purana*, and the unabashed homosexual acts of love and lust between them, Pattanaik fits in the oppositional element of Bourdieu’s ‘sub-field of restricted production’ in the sense that the story, as constituting a sub-field of a homo-erotic retelling of a religious myth/story, is located within an already restricted literary production of the ‘queer erotica’ genre in the field of queer cultural production.

¹⁴ Datta’s text provides an example. Other relevant examples can be Indra Das’ *The Devourers* (2015) and Jerry Pinto’s *Murder in Mahim* (2017) where the narratives introduce queer sub-plots located within mainstream literary genres such as speculative fiction/fantasy and murder-thriller respectively.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, *Field*, 40.

definitive in the first place, since there aren't binaries anymore but multiple possibles of struggle in the field of cultural production. Datta's novel is one curious example as it narrativises, rather optimistically, the possibilities of same-sex romance and relationship within what is basically marketed as a 'straight-as-it-comes' love story. The fact that there are gay characters and a sub-plot of romantic liaison increasingly problematises both the autonomous principle – the literary 'narrative' capital is that of the 'other' – and the heteronomous principle – the 'author' and the 'text' are situated in a mainstream literary market – alike. However, must this mean that Datta's novel must not be considered in the redemptive proselytisation of the literary field queer cultural production? Or is it presumed that some compromises must be made at sustaining this dominant principle, in some form or the other, to negotiate the politics of the field? Or is it that the text of Datta is merely an appropriation in itself to make use of the possible market of queer readership through its portrayal of queer characters and romance, conveniently located within a larger heteronormative framework of love stories?¹⁶

Within this problematic of multiple possibles of literary legitimisation is also located the three competing principles of legitimacy that, as Bourdieu states, is constituted of these: producers of culture, the critics of such produced culture, and the consumers of these forms of production.¹⁷ In the context of contemporary queer literature and its field of cultural production, the likes of Datta can provide a reference to other contemporary (and future) writers of the romantic fiction genre to introduce and explore queer sexualities, while appropriating the politics of specific representation. The numerous examples of recently

¹⁶ Within this problematic of multiple possibles, then, is also implicated the definition of the writer – in this case, the writer who writes queer literature or contributes to it in some form or the other and the parameters of the written text. The 'monopoly of literary legitimacy,' as Bourdieu puts it, renders the stakes in such literary struggles that are aimed at defining who writes contemporary queer fiction in India, and who does not, much problematic than expected, since the monopoly that Bourdieu refers to in this context seems to be often conflicted and mostly subjective (relatively so) in a case such as the one I deal with here. One might not call Datta a writer of queer Indian literature at all.

¹⁷ See Bourdieu, *Field*, 50–51.

published gay romance fiction in India, some of which I discuss, analyse and interrogate in this project, utilise the ‘field’ that is being constantly culturally produced and function towards re-forming the field and production of culture itself – ‘becoming’ a ‘minor literature’¹⁸ of agency and for cultural-literary refashioning.

The role of the critic, and the academic critic by extension, will be that of producing a legitimising discourse of the reception of such texts and writers within the field of queer literature and culture, and also accommodation of the same within the field of the dominant/hetero-centred literary culture. As is evident from the gradual increase in the publication of critical texts on LGBTQ+ issues and literature in the past decade or so, this task seems to have been taken up with much interest and responsibility by critics and academics.¹⁹ The role of the consumers – the readers, specifically – is also complicit with that of the critics in that their reception must form the basis of a particular form of legitimisation of the discourses on queer sexualities as portrayed and presented for consumption in the concerned texts,²⁰ though there is yet no plausible way to analyse it.

¹⁸ I refer to and make use of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theorisation of ‘Minor Literature.’ In the context of contemporary queer literary ventures concerning romance fiction, examples of generic re-fashioning discursively advance the formative genre to inform and locate the aspirations and politics of a ‘subjugated group’ that “speaks as though it were representing, rather than forming, its identity” to a ‘subject group’ that “forms [itself] as an act of speech or demand, as an event of becoming.” Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 117. For a discussion on Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of ‘Minor Literature’ and ‘minoritarian politics’ in literature, see chapter 6 of Claire Colebrook’s critical commentary in *Gilles Deleuze*.

¹⁹ In the context of literature, two examples seem very relevant. The first is R. Raj Rao’s historicisation of LGBTQ+ literature in India where he not only highlights the serious, and discriminative, lack in the ‘mainstream’ literary histories of English literature available in India but also proposes that “LGBT writing [...] will have to write its own history just as it must create its own aesthetics.” Rao, *Love*, 126. See chapter 8 of *Ibid*. The second example is Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta’s discussions on ‘Queer Studies’ in the Indian academia concerning the pedagogical issues and contexts of teaching LGBTQ+ literature in educational institutions where they not only provide a detailed history on the various issues but also comment on the requirement to queer the academia. See chapter 8 of Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta, *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2019).

²⁰ This seems to have already been reflected in the context of the readership of ‘queer’ literature in English in India, as can be perceived in the statement of Shobhna S. Kumar of Queer Ink that her “online bookstore has seen a 30-40% increase in the number of buyers every year.” Preksha Malu, “The Rise and Rise of Queer Literature in India,” *DNA India*, Nov 16, 2014. However, in the context of ‘queer’ literature in regional languages, the same might not be the case. For example, in a session on ‘Knocking on the Door: The Challenges and Prospects of Queer Publication’ at the first Kolkata Queer Literary Festival (2019), representatives of some

The tripartite structure of this legitimacy discourse is bound to form a basis for explicating the relevance of the producers of ‘queer’ texts located within the multiple possibles of the literary field of queer cultural production – an intensive critical investigation of which will be an exercise that is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but nonetheless important and desirable.

A Queer ‘Habitus’?

To return to the initial discussion regarding ‘positions’ and ‘position-taking,’ Bourdieu revises his argument to re-frame it as a negotiated interaction and confrontation vis-à-vis time and space. In this context, Bourdieu writes that “to understand the practices of writers and artists [...] entails understanding that they are the result of the meeting of two histories: the history of the positions they occupy and the history of their dispositions.”²¹ Bourdieu states that within the dynamic construction of the field of cultural production and of the space of possibles, access to the different positions and the disposition of agents come within a correlative interplay of subjective “schemes of perception and appreciation;”²² effectively, this interaction of schemes constitutes the ‘habitus’ for the particular field of cultural production. Following Bourdieu’s idea of the ‘habitus,’ the field of positions and the schemes that they operate through and are constituted of must be key areas of focus for and towards a critically informed reception and analysis of the ‘positions’ entailed in contemporary trends in queer literary cultures and the possibilities in this particular field of

publishing houses in Kolkata – Mandira Sen (STREE and SAMYA – Popular Prakashan), Sourav Mukhopadhyay (Executive Publisher at Saptarshi Prakashan), and Subhankar Dey (CEO at Dey’s Publication) – discussed the various challenges in finding, publishing, distributing, and marketing viable ‘queer’ literary texts in a regional language like Bangla.

²¹ Bourdieu, *Field*, 61.

²² *Ibid.*, 64.

cultural production in India, specifically in the context of the representation of ‘gay romance’ in/within the genre of romance fiction.

Furthermore, to locate ‘queer’ texts, such those included in this study, in a queer ‘habitus’ is also constitutive of challenges and struggles that, by virtue of antagonisms and homologies, conspire towards a prismatic cultural discourse. Critical investments of such sorts will provide the study of this field with the understanding of the ways in which the ‘space of possibles’ is concurrently constituted, fashioned, and defined within the queer literary cultures of/in contemporary India. Akhil Katyal’s discussion and preliminary insights into the underlying politics of contemporary ‘gay writing’ and publishing and its market dynamics in India provides one such example of interrogating how ‘queer’ literature is being produced, consumed, and revisioned.²³ Though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve into such an interrogation, research on contemporary queer literature being published in India can benefit in multifarious ways through in-depth and critical studies in the politics, ethics, and logic of publication concerning LGBTQ+ issues, especially after the 2018 Supreme Court’s judgement that decriminalised homosexuality by reading down the much dreaded and hated Section 377.

²³ See chapter 5 of Akhil Katyal, *The Doubleness of Sexuality: Idioms of Same-Sex Desire in Modern India* (New Delhi: New Text, 2016) where, referring to some key LGBTQ+ texts and anthologies, he comments on the ‘doubleness’ of gay writing in India and also on the socio-sexual ramifications of ‘queer’ literary publication.

INTRODUCTION

I. On Queer Loves: The Contexts, Modernities, and Ideas of ‘Gay Romance’

In differentiating between ‘passionate love’ and ‘romantic love’ in the context of the ‘West,’ Anthony Giddens claims that while “passionate love is a more or less universal phenomenon,” romantic love “is much more culturally specific.”²⁴ However, the idea of ‘romantic love’ as being specific to and as a product of European cultures has been challenged and revised by anthropologists who have interrogated the histories, constructs, and narratives of romantic love in both the West and the non-West in a near-‘universal’ framework.²⁵ The lack William R. Jankowiak and Edward F. Fischer have highlighted in their findings with respect to the need for inter-culturally interrogating both the particular/specific and the universal/general in relation to one another has since been undertaken by some; critical works by Sudhir Kakar and John Munder Ross,²⁶ Charles Lindholm²⁷ and William M. Reddy²⁸ are examples that focus on the need for culture-specific studies on/of ‘romantic love’ and its cultures in non-Western contexts. But how does one study love and romance? How does one analyse something that evades analysis?

As anthropologist Charles Lindholm puts it, “scholarly reluctance to study love is connected to the way romantic love has been imagined to be a transcendent experience that,

²⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 38.

²⁵ See William R. Jankowiak and Edward F. Fischer, “A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love,” *Ethnology* 31, no. 2 (1992): 149–150, 154. Also see William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2–5.

²⁶ See chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 of Sudhir Kakar and John Munder Ross, *Tales of Love, Sex, and Danger*, 2nd Ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁷ See Charles Lindholm, “Love and Structure,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 15, no. 3-4 (1998): 249–257. .Also see Charles Lindholm, “Romantic Love and Anthropology,” *Etnofoor* 19, no. 1 (2006): 13–17.

²⁸ See chapters 4 & 5 of Reddy, *Love*.

by its very nature, resists any rational analysis.”²⁹ In fact, the problematic of dualism in both the qualitative scholarship on romantic love that reduces love to its singularly poetic or obscene/pornographic form and the discourse of quantitative, experimental science do injustice to the idea of romance and love itself.³⁰ As such, psychoanalysts Sudhir Kakar and John Munder Ross question, “[h]ow dare we speak of worlds of love when all love and are loved so differently?”³¹ However, since “most of the discourses about love [...] are to be found in literary sources,”³² it becomes viable and desirable to attempt studying love and romance and their cultures through an investment in ‘reading’ their literatures. Specifically, the ‘love story’ emerges as a major generic vehicle in the literary understanding of love vis-à-vis the socio-politico-cultural. In Kakar and Ross’ ‘love theory,’ the ‘love story’ features as the one that gives ‘form’ to love through its “invocations and evocations.”³³ Furthermore, it also can be considered that “the love story is the prime subverter of official mores [...],”³⁴ more so in terms of the non-heteronormative and ‘queer,’ as a mirror to the realities (and fictions) of human relationships and as potential agents of re-fashioning socio-cultural understanding of love and romance.³⁵

With this understanding, I undertake a basic exercise in critiquing two ‘mainstream’ anthologies of ‘Indian’ love stories and romance narratives to highlight how they reflect upon the histories of love and desire in India (often in a restricted and generalised manner) and to show how examples of contemporary ‘gay romance’ and same-sex love fiction in India have

²⁹ Lindholm, “Romantic,” 8.

³⁰ See *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ Kakar and Ross, *Tales*, 4.

³² Francesca Orsini, “Introduction,” in *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, ed. Francesca Orsini (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

³³ Kakar and Ross, *Tales*, 175.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ Ross and Kakar’s psychoanalytical attempt at formulating a ‘phenomenology of passionate love’ is one such examples at analysing love and romance in the academic discourse where they refer to the theories and views of the likes of Sigmund Freud, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, etc. to study and discuss the existing cultural-literary narratives, traditions, and constitutive dimensions of romantic eroticism and passionate love, desire, and longing in Indian contexts. See Kakar and Ross, *Tales*, 178–196.

actually done much justice to the ‘Indian’ traditions of love and romance in the context of relative contemporaneity. Thereafter, I explicate upon a theoretical understanding of multivalent sexual modernities in the Indian context to propose its relation to and utility in the examples, and a spectrum of ‘gay romance’ fiction that the dissertation analyses.

Towards a Critique of the (Hetero-)Canon of Love: Revisiting the ‘erotic’ in the ‘romantic,’ *Shringara rasa*, and *Vipralambha*

The Penguin Book of Classical Indian Love Stories and Lyrics (1996), edited by Ruskin Bond, makes a distinction between the ‘literature of love’ and the ‘literature of love-making.’ In the introduction to the anthology, Bond states that he has not included extracts from Vatsyayana’s *Kamasutra* in the book, as the art of love-making “does not really fall in the purview of this collection” that he clarifies focuses on “passion, desire, tenderness, jealousy, sensuality, even platonic love.”³⁶ The fact that this logic of sanitizing the ‘love’ story from its sexual eroticism seems to be an implicit commentary on mainstreaming propriety and in the process, also seems to be inconsistent with ‘Indian’ traditions of the union between amorous love and erotic desire, especially in the context of same-sex desires, erotic love, and union that the *Kamasutra* describes without derision or censorship.³⁷

Historian William M. Reddy, in his comparative study between Western and non-Western traditions, cultures, and histories of ‘romantic love,’ claims that nowhere in the Indian context do “the conceptions, practices, or rituals surrounding sexual partnerships rely

³⁶ Ruskin Bond, ed., *The Penguin Book of Classical Indian Love Stories and Lyrics* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996), xii.

³⁷ Chapter 9 of the *Kamasutra* on ‘*auparishtaka*’ or ‘mouth congress’ discusses acts of oral sex vis-à-vis men who desire other men. See *The Kamasutra of Vatsyayana*, trans. Richard F. Burton and intro. Margot Anand (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 66–74. For a discussion on the concept of same-sex union in the *Kamasutra*, also see Ruth Vanita, *Love’s Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005), 46–48.

on an opposition between true love, on the one hand, and desire, on the other.”³⁸ He notes that in 8th-12th century Bengal and Orissa, erotic arousal and bodily sexual acts were not considered antagonistic to romantic love, but they were rather regarded “as filled with positive (and negative) intentionality and spiritual potential.”³⁹ The diversity in cultural forms notwithstanding, he documents “the existence of a way of imagining and enacting sexual relationships that in no way relies on a distinction between love and lust, between a sublime emotion and a bodily appetite,”⁴⁰ making Bond’s argument subject to suspect and wanting revision. Another important fact makes itself known in this anthology – there is not a single story/narrative/writing in the anthology that speaks of the plurality and diversity of sexualities and same-sex love in the ‘classical’ literature of romance in India.

In its lukewarm ‘traditionalist’ approach that side-lines the erotic and the non-heteronormative, the anthology stands in stark comparison to the cultural beliefs and past traditions of the ‘literary romantics,’ as Amrita Narayan presents in her anthology *The Parrots of Desire: 3,000 Years of Indian Erotica* (2017), being those who have been erotically positive and who believe in the legitimacy and agency of the erotic and the non-heteronormative.⁴¹ Narayan includes several “contemporary Indian writers who match and build on the efforts of their ancestors [...] and continue to shed profound light on the erotic.”⁴² I notice that similar to the tradition of the ‘literary romantics,’ contemporary writers of ‘gay romance’ fiction in India have also challenged both the implicit politics of erotic propriety (while preserving the idea of the emotional-spiritual ‘romance’) and the explicit politics of non-heteronormative non-exclusion (while accepting the reality of plurality in

³⁸ Reddy, *Love*, 2. In fact, Reddy draws attention to the point that terms like the Sanskrit *shringara rasa* “refer to a longing for a sublime sexual partnership that is reciprocal [...] but] do not distinguish desire, conceived of as an appetite, from love, conceived of as selfless care and devotion to another.” *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴¹ See Amrita Narayan, ed., *The Parrots of Desire: 3,000 Years of Indian Erotica* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2017), 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

‘queer’-ness) in/of ‘mainstream’ texts of ‘Indian’ love stories. All of the texts included in this study have both brought same-sex love into the domain of the romance fiction and most have done so rather audaciously with intense and elaborate descriptions of both the sexual-erotic and the emotional-sensual in the love, desire, lust, and longing between men.

In his introduction to *Indian Love Stories* (1999) – a collection similar Bond’s in its non-inclusion of the romances of non-normative sexualities, the editor Sudhir Kakar makes the claim, about contemporary writing on love and romance in India, that the “traditional certainty that a literary depiction of love is marked by the presence of the *shringara rasa*⁴³ is no longer available to us.”⁴⁴ The *Natyashastra* states that the *shringara rasa* or the erotic sentiment – with its specific markers⁴⁵ – has its basis in union as well as separation” and that *vipralambha* “relates to a condition of retaining optimism arising out of yearning and anxiety.”⁴⁶ As such, Kakar’s second claim that the element of *vipralambha* – the love-in-separation – no longer “heighten[s] love, as ancient poetics would have us believe, but only

⁴³ The *Natyashastra* lays down the basic tenets of the art of drama and theatrical performance. As a crucial part of the treatise, the theory of *Bhava-Rasa* establishes a relationship between the performer and the spectator. The term *bhava* can be translated as a state, feelings, or emotions. In the context of dramaturgy, *bhavas* are the emotions represented in the performance. The *rasa* or the sentiment results from the *bhava* or the state. See *The Natyashastra: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics: Ascribed to Bharata-Muni Vol I. (Chapters I-XXVII)*, trans. Manomohan Ghosh (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951), 105–106. Daniel H. H. Ingalls comments that “[a] *rasa* is produced by the combining of the determinants (*vibhāvas*), the consequents (*anubhāvas*), and the temporary or transient states of mind (*vyabhicārinah* or *vyabhicāribhāvas*).” Daniel H. H. Ingalls, “Introduction,” in *The Dhvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, trans. Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 16. *Rati* – the state of love – is one of the eight permanent *bhavas* and the *rasa* that it evokes is *shringara* – the erotic romance/love. It has two bases – *sambhoga* (union) and *vipralambha* (separation). See *Ibid.*, 108. Also see *The Dhvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, trans. Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 263. For a discussion on the idea of *rati* as ‘mundane love-lust’ and *shringara* as spiritual love-lust, see Reddy, *Love*, 225. For a discussion on the hybridity of the two ideas in Indian cultural practices/narratives such as in the *devadasi* tradition, see *Ibid.*, 266, 281. For a discussion on the important status of the *shringara rasa* as conceived in literature as erotic love, see Ingalls, “Introduction,” 17–18.

⁴⁴ Sudhir Kakar, ed., *Indian Love Stories*, (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2006), 11.

⁴⁵ While the love-in-union is represented through “the pleasures of the season, [...] the company of beloved persons, [...] going to a garden, and enjoying oneself there, seeing the beloved one, hearing his or her words, playing and dallying with him or her,” the love-in-separation is represented by “indifference, languor, fear, dreaming awakening, illness, insanity, inactivity [...]” *The Natyashastra*, 108–109.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

our despair as we confront our basic solitude”⁴⁷ marks a major shift away from the classical Indian ideas of romance and its performative aspects in literary traditions. However, this does not seem to be the case in the context of the contemporary literary representation of ‘queer’ loves, as some examples of contemporary ‘gay romance’ fiction make use of the ‘classical’ idea of *vipralambha*,⁴⁸ rather diligently, by including positive denouements of and happy reunions in the romantic plot, albeit in the context of non-heteronormative forms of loves and their expressions.

Hinting at a politics of cultural hybridization of literary traditions, several of the texts included in this study present both the *shringara rasa* and *vipralambha* as crucial in the heightening the pleasures of love. For example, in *Vivek and I*, Kaushik often indulges in a ritualistic *shringara* where he partakes in grooming himself in order to impress his beloved Vivek⁴⁹ and in the hope to lure him, with his beauty, into a sexual union.⁵⁰ *The Boyfriend* makes a more agential use of the *shringara rasa* in the preparations leading to the ritualistic enactment of the marriage between the two male protagonists (discussed later in chapter 2). In the context of love-in-separation, *vipralambha* – or *viraha*⁵¹ – features predominantly in *Vivek and I* as a positive element contributing towards the romance plot.⁵² Whenever Vivek is away from Kaushik, the latter frets and longs for his beloved more intensely and passionately, making his desires grow stronger and love deeper⁵³ to the extent that Kaushik undertakes a risky journey to Vivek’s home in a far off village in the middle of the night for the sake of

⁴⁷ Kakar, *Stories*, 12.

⁴⁸ Ingalls, Maason, and Patwardhan remind that *vipralambha* or “[l]ove-in-separation is always a temporary form of *rasa*. It looks toward and hopes for and is succeeded by love-in-union.” *The Dhvanyaloka*, 288.

⁴⁹ Mayur Patel, *Vivek and I* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 13.

⁵⁰ See *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵¹ For a discussion on the idea of *viraha* in the Vaishnava contexts, concerning mainly Krishna and the Bhakti texts, see Paul M. Toomey, “Krishna’s Consuming Passions: Food as Metaphor and Metonym for Emotion at Mount Govardhan,” in *Divine Passions : The Social Construction of Emotion in India*, ed. Owen M. Lynch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 169, 184, 191. Also see Reddy, *Love*, 262.

⁵² In fact, the narration mentions Kaushik experiencing several of the elements of *vipralambha*, as have been stated in the *Natyashastra* (see the earlier mention), making the ‘love-in-separation’ a key motif in Kaushik’s love for Vivek. See Patel, *Vivek and I*, 237, 339, 345.

⁵³ See *Ibid.*, 19, 92, 229, 231.

love.⁵⁴ Similarly, *Hostel Room 131* amplifies the element of love-in-separation by beginning the novel with an elaborate episode of the performance of *vipralambha* and in the form of Siddharth's intense longing for and desperate attempts at reuniting with his beloved Sudhir.⁵⁵ In fact, much of the romance plot includes the elements of numerous partings, ensuing love-in-separation, arduous travails (discussed later in chapter 4), and sensational reunions with an ultimate 'happy ending' to the love story. In these contexts of the love-in-separation in the novels, unlike Kakar's observation regarding contemporary heterosexual romance fiction in India, 'gay romance' fiction re-presents separation as sustaining optimism and heightening love, making clear connections to the classical 'Indian' ideas of love and romance.

Towards Multivalent Sexual Modernities: Problematizing 'Pre-'/Post-' Locations and Positions in Same-Sex Literary Cultures of/in India

In addressing the issue of cultural modernity in the domain of alternative modernities, the question of the past vs the present becomes informed by and infused in a problematic of the contextuality of cultural representation. The idea of cultural modernity as a functional derivative of and from the West poses critical questions for the idea of 'modernity' itself, one of which is this: whose modernity in relation to whose? This problematic that Dilip P. Gaonkar calls the "dilemmas of western modernity" renders every form of contemporary modernity suspect to an unresolved plurality at the face of correlations in temporal and spatial locations.⁵⁶ There is multiplicity in the idea of modernity, i.e., if one considers Michel Foucault's idea of modernity as "an attitude [...] a mode of relating to contemporary

⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, 339–342.

⁵⁵ See R. Raj Rao, *Hostel Room 131* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2010), 3–27.

⁵⁶ Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities," in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

reality,”⁵⁷ there are ‘modernities’ located and functioning in multiply discursive manners. In Charles Taylor’s take on the multiplicity of modernities, the ‘cultural’ vs the ‘acultural’ or the “culture-specific” vs the “culture-neutral” understanding posits further questions in arriving at a workable consensus regarding how the modernity of the West can be discounted at the cost of interrogating the modernity of the non-West.⁵⁸ Both Gaonkar and Taylor find the acultural strand of modernity as lacking the access to “divergences” and “connections” that the cultural strand of ‘alternative modernities’ theory provides.⁵⁹

Taking this as a point of departure, I am interested in a similar problematic of the multiplicity in convergences and divergences of cultural modernities in the context of non-normative sexualities – their understanding, representation, and discussion – in contemporary literary cultures in/of India. Nivedita Menon claims that sexual subjectivities constitute and are constitutive of a contingent, relational process⁶⁰ and avers that there is need for diversely critical ways of understanding the constructs of the familial, the national, and the personal-political in India.⁶¹ Similarly, Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya have claimed that for those researching on and examining issues of non-normative sexualities in contemporary India, “it is important to be conscious not just of [...] exclusions and marginalization in the formation of canonical systems of knowledge” but also “the discursive production of sexual and gendered identities.”⁶² In this context, I have already discussed the former issue of the (hetero-)canon; in this section, I consider the latter issue of sexual identity politics. I consider

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, vol. 1 of The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 309.

⁵⁸ Charles Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity,” in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 172–173.

⁵⁹ See Gaonkar, “Modernities,” 17; Taylor, “Modernity,” 195.

⁶⁰ See Nivedita Menon, “Outing Heteronormativity: Nation, Citizen, Feminist Disruptions,” in *Sexualities*, ed. Nivedita Menon (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2007), 17–18.

⁶¹ See *Ibid.*, 10–42.

⁶² Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya, “Introduction,” in *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), xiv. They also assert that “any serious study of sexuality/sexualities and the politics perpetually at play in determining the complex, diverse connotations of these terms must necessarily start with a consideration of notions of identity and identity-formation, sexual or otherwise.” *Ibid.*, x.

the term ‘queer’ to posit a heterogeneous and non-monolithic idea of non-normative and non-conformist sexualities and their discourses and praxes. However, in the context of non-Western sexualities and sexual politics in a country like India, it becomes necessary to problematise and rethink ‘queer’ (as concept, construct, and ideology) itself and by extension, ‘queer theory’ (as critical discourse) and ‘queer studies’ (as critical field). Considering Peter A. Jackson’s, Adam I. Green’s, David V. Ruffolo, and Amin Ghaziani’s varied arguments regarding the dynamic politics and utilitarian relevance of the paradigmatic reconsiderations of sexuality vis-à-vis theorisations of the ‘pre-gay,’ the ‘post-queer,’ and the ‘post-gay,’ I am interested in re-considering contemporary queer cultural studies in India from a ‘literary’ point of view. This section considers ‘alternative modernities’ and the various locations and positions vis-à-vis sexuality discourses co-relationally and proposes arriving at an idea of multivalent (and alterative)⁶³ sexual modernities.

In the domain of queer modernity, Jackson’s theorization upon the ‘pre-gay/post-queer’ in his discussion on Asian perspectives on sexual diversity makes three key claims: (1) ‘pre-gay’ LGBTQ+ cultures and subjectivities have existed before and despite Western academia’s constructions of the particular discourses of sexualities; (2) the globalization in the 1990s aided the Asian contexts to appropriate the Western discourses of ‘queer’ sexualities to induce critical insights and resist local strictures; and (3) the selective and strategic uses of ‘queer’ constructs have resulted in new ways of carving out new modes of

⁶³ I replace the use of the term ‘alternative’ with that of the term ‘alterative.’ ‘Alternative’ has had an etymological baggage of understanding and theorising upon non-heteronormative sexualities; claiming an ‘alternative’ to the heteronorm would mean eventually acceding legitimacy to an essentialist idea of the hetero-‘norm.’ I agree with Bose and Bhattacharyya in their non-usage of the ‘alternative’ as a way of countering “a hinted illegitimacy of all counter-heteronormative sexualities in an odious and unnecessary comparison with a single sanctioned sexual practice.” *Ibid.*, xx. Thus, instead of the term ‘alternative,’ I use the ‘alterative,’ vis-à-vis multiple sexual modernities, to entail in the discourses and praxes of the non-heteronormative and the ‘queer’ an agency of alteration – a potential for challenging and changing the heteronorm. As such, I also consider that the multiple and alterative sexual modernities also relate to and help construct alterative queer spaces of/for same-sex romance in the novels included in this study.

eroticised subjectivity and intersectionality and of being post-queer in Asia.⁶⁴ Though I agree with Jackson that “the expansion of Western-based knowledge to incorporate historical and contemporary forms of Asian erotic diversity will decentre many aspects of Eurocentric theory,”⁶⁵ in the context of Indian locations and positions vis-à-vis non-normative sexualities and sexual subjectivities and discourses, I find that the constructs of the ‘pre-gay’ and of the ‘post-queer’ do not wholly suffice.

In a similar context, Green’s theorisation of the ‘post-queer’ framework necessitated by the inadequacy of ‘queer theory’ considers both the strain of ‘radical deconstructionism,’ as furthered by Judith Butler (that has advocated for the ‘queer’ as instituting denaturalisation of and critical distance from sexual categories and deconstruction and rejection of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ identities)⁶⁶ and the strain of ‘radical subversion,’ as furthered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Alexander Doty (that presumes that sexuality of homosexuals, being marginal, is necessarily disruptive to and subversive of the social order through their erotic practices)⁶⁷ as insufficient. While Green rightly highlights that both strains either “gloss over the enduring institutional organization of sexuality” or “grossly oversimplify complex developmental processes attendant to sexual identification,”⁶⁸ the ‘post-queer’ understanding, solely, does not suffice for Indian socio-literary contexts. The idea of the ‘post-queer’ has also been, alternatively, theorised as going beyond the relationship between queer bodies and queer subjectivities, and exploring what Ruffolo terms as ‘post-queer considerations’ that call for a shift from ‘queer possibilities’ to ‘post-queer potentialities.’ He argues that post-queer considerations are “attracted to disrupting the link between bodies and subjectivity so as to

⁶⁴ See Peter A. Jackson, “Pre-Gay, Post Queer: Thai Perspectives on Proliferating Gender/Sex Diversity in Asia,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, no. 3-4 (2001): 5–7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 8.

⁶⁶ See Adam Isaiah Green, “Gay but Not Queer: Toward a Post-Queer Study of Sexuality,” *Theory and Society* 31, no. 4 (2002): 524–526.

⁶⁷ See *Ibid.*, 531–533.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 523.

introduce more creative ways of thinking about bodies.”⁶⁹ Though Ruffolo calls for an interesting rethinking of doing ‘queer’ studies, it cannot be implemented towards a holistic interrogation of the Indian contexts of non-normative sexualities.

Ghaziani re-visits the idea of the ‘post-gay,’ embedded in the ‘heterosexualization of gay culture,’⁷⁰ and “characterized by the twin impulses of assimilation of gays into the mainstream [...] and an escalated internal diversification of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities.”⁷¹ He theorises the ‘post-gay’ to argue for a critical re-visioning and re-fashioning of homosexual subjectivities and existing frameworks of ‘queer’-ness, in the context of ‘collective identities.’⁷² Though Ghaziani’s theorisation can be used towards discussing Indian contexts of sexualities, it would help reveal only one of many interrelated and complex aspects.

When considered in the context of sexualities in the Indian context, concepts like the ‘pre-gay,’ ‘post-gay,’ and ‘post-queer’ can be utilised in an attempt to re-think and re-orient ‘queer theory’ and ‘queer studies.’ In fact, when the published anthologies of same-sex narratives and texts in India such as *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* (1999) edited by Hoshang Merchant,⁷³ *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (1999) edited by Ashwini Sukthankar,⁷⁴ *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000 [2008]) edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai,⁷⁵ and *Out!: Queer Stories from the New Queer India* (2012) edited by Minal

⁶⁹ David V. Ruffolo, “Post-Queer Considerations,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Michael O’Rourke (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 380.

⁷⁰ See Amin Ghaziani, “Post-Gay Collective Identity Construction,” *Social Problems* 58, no. 1 (2011): 99–100.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷² See *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷³ *Yaraana* entails a politics of the ‘post-gay’ in its assertion towards the use of the term ‘gay’ in order to show how its politics can be accessed, utilised, and reframed in the specific socio-cultural contexts of Indian sexual modernities.

⁷⁴ Similar to *Yaraana*, *Facing the Mirror* subscribes to the term ‘lesbian’ towards asserting the agential commonality of the narratives in the voicing of ‘love for women,’ bringing them together in solidarity and proud assertion in specifically Indian contexts.

⁷⁵ *Same-Sex Love in India* provides extensive references to and inclusion of narratives of same-sex love and intimate contexts of the past in an attempt to unearth the histories of and legitimise the realities of non-

Hajratwala⁷⁶ are considered in this context, it can be noticed that they have entailed in them similar politics of literary re-presentations. However, the use of none of these concepts individually suffice, as discussed earlier, in adequately understanding, problematising, and revising how we perceive queer sexualities in the Indian contexts marked by multiple locations and discourses of sexual modernities. They need to be considered simultaneously and concurrently for arriving at a workable idea of what I term multivalent (and alterative) sexual modernities in India, specifically in the context of contemporary queer literature in India.

Towards a Multivalent Idea of Queer Love: A Model Spectrum of Contemporary Indian ‘Gay Romance’ Novels in English

Francesca Orsini, in mapping the cultural history of love in South Asia, emphasises on the plurality of the ideas, practices, and cultures of love and romance in the Indian subcontinent – not as monoliths but as complex histories concerning both ‘affect’ and ‘sociality.’⁷⁷ Vanita and Kidwai’s now-iconic *Same-Sex Love in India* can be considered as one such important example that has re-visited and re-vitalised traditions, histories, and narratives of same-sex desires and love in the Indian context, that have been otherwise neglected and sidelined by ‘normative’/‘mainstream’ anthologies on love and romance as discussed earlier. In its diversity of literary examples from the Sanskritic and the Perso-Urdu

heteronormative sexualities and their lives, and as such, is reflective of a ‘pre-gay’ politics of alternative modernities. In doing so, Vanita and Kidwai not only fill the gap left by anthologies such as those edited by Bond and Kakar (as discussed earlier) but also present a collection of ‘queer’ literary texts, histories, and traditions of same-sex love that, in its basic structure, represents to its best abilities an organic movement across temporal periods and spatial locations towards a multivalent queer modernity. Popular Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don’t Tell You* (2014) also functions within a similar ‘pre-gay’ paradigm of referring back to, revising/re-interpreting, and ‘legitimising’ non-heteronormative sexualities in the Indian contexts of myths.

⁷⁶ *Out!* provides an example of a ‘post-queer’ politics in contemporary literary investment by considering the term ‘queer’ in a broad sense in order to encompass stories and narratives of a multitude of sexualities, sexual subjectivities, and queer modernities that defy any pigeon-holing.

⁷⁷ See Orsini, “Introduction,” 1.

traditions of ancient and medieval India to the colonial and postcolonial modern, the anthology attempts at proselytising a progression of literature that implies a glorification of the rich history of narratives on same-sex love in India and converges with the cultural modernity of contemporary queer politics.

Such a ‘queer’ anthology takes into consideration the sexual vis-à-vis the literary where the text itself functions on multiple levels and (to use Ruth Vanita’s own term) through “ever-shifting configurations;”⁷⁸ I understand this as an example of the multivalence of sexual modernities. It also reflects what Bose and Bhattacharyya, in the context of studying the politics of sexualities, have claimed about the need for interrogating the ways in which the ‘Indian’ notions of sexualities are “constructed out of the peculiar, particular, multiplicitous effects and perceptions of tradition, modernity, colonization, globalization that are more often than not in confrontation with each other.”⁷⁹ Revisionary re-considerations of the sexual vis-à-vis the socio-cultural and politico-legal have also been attempted by critical projects that aim at positing the idea of multivalent queer modernities in some recent sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic analyses of LGBTQ+ lives, practices, and relations in India.⁸⁰ This line of thought has also been carried forward by akshay khanna⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ruth Vanita, “Introduction,” in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9.

⁷⁹ Bose and Bhattacharyya, “Introduction,” xii.

⁸⁰ Some relevant examples are Suparna Bhaskaran’s *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects* (2004), Ruth Vanita’s *Love’s Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (2005), Parmesh Shahani’s *Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (Be)longing in Contemporary India* (2008), Naisargi N. Dave’s *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (2012), and akshay khanna’s *Sexualness* (2016).

⁸¹ khanna provides one such example of considering the complex and dynamic politics of sexualities by suggesting a theoretical distinction between ‘subjection’ and ‘subjectivation’ – the former being about self-recognition and the latter inter-experiential – and the slippage between them that not only highlights the temporality of identities but also reflects upon an ontology of multiple personhoods constructed through/by both discourse and praxis. See akshay khanna, “Us ‘Sexuality Types’: A Critical Engagement with the Postcoloniality of Sexuality,” in *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), 178–181.

and Mayur Suresh⁸² in their idea of sexual subjectivation and by Oliver Ross⁸³ in his recourse to sexual syncretism.

With a similar understanding about a multivalent idea of non-heteronormative sexualities, I focus on the need to critically read and discuss literature of love, romance, and the erotic. In this context, I am interested in analyses of ‘Indian’ ideas, aspirations, and representations of romantic love by/in contemporary ‘gay romance’ fiction, that according to me, is informed by an idea of multivalent sexual modernities in the literary cultures of love and romance in India, especially when considered in relation to, and distinct from, West-informed notions of modernity and romance. To this end, I focus on same-sex love and romance between men as represented in contemporary fiction, in English in the Indian context. My use of the terms ‘queer loves’ and ‘gay romance’ is located within an understanding that the novels that I discuss and analyse work within a discourse of multivalent (and alterative) sexual modernities and that their contributions are invested with a politics of re-claiming, problematising, and diversifying the constructs of both ‘gay’ and ‘romance’ in contemporary literature.

In the context of this dissertation’s scope, I look at the four beforementioned constructs as ‘locations’ and ‘positions.’ If ‘gay’ can be considered to represent homosexuality in the Indian context, ‘pre-gay’ can be considered as representing a location of

⁸² Speaking in terms similar to khanna in the context of the ways in which ideas and practices of male-to-male desires and activities are constructed and consumed in India, Suresh claims that the criminalised subjectivation of the queer/homosexual individual can and is challenged and subverted by the reality of same-sex desires, interactions, and relations that are sustained through strategic negotiations, but with its own discursive limitations. See Mayur Suresh, “‘I’m only here to do Masti’: Sodomy Law and the Limits of Subjectivation,” in *Law Like Love: Queer Perspectives on Law*, ed. Arvind Narrain and Alok Gupta (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2011), 466—476.

⁸³ Ross notes the “impossibility of sexual authenticity or terminological purity displaces the hierarchization of ‘Western’ and ‘Indian’ conceptions of sexual desire and practice” and, therefore, proposes a model of polyphonic and intersectional syncretism. Oliver Ross, *Same-Sex Desire in Indian Culture: Representations in Literature and Film, 1970-2015* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 15—16. Also See *Ibid.*, 12—22, 40—41. He suggests that the “formulations of same-sex desiring identities and practices are engendered and perpetuated by [...] a mutually constitutive synergy of the discursive and the material.” *Ibid.*, 17.

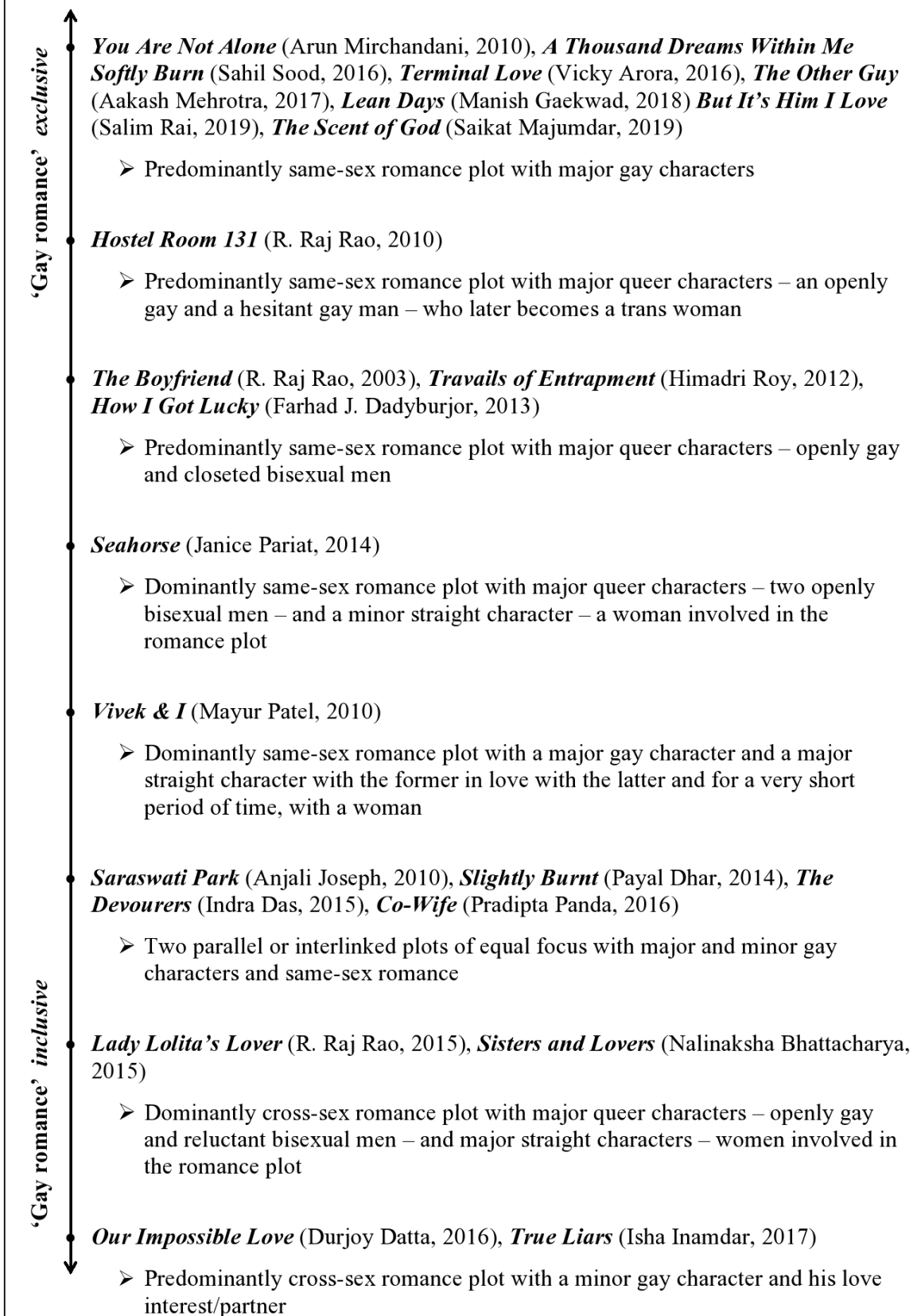
both non-access to the discourse of ‘gay’ and pre-existence of other forms of same-sex subjectivities; and ‘post-gay’ can be considered as representing a position marked by acceptance, performance, and refashioning of sexuality beyond the ‘gay.’ Similarly, if ‘queer’ is considered to represent a radical re-take on homosexuality, ‘pre-queer’ can be considered as representing a location of both non-arrival at the discourse of ‘queer’ and subscription to a compromise of non-non-normativity and non-disruption; and ‘post-queer’ can be considered as representing a position marked by a disruptive take on and politics of going beyond the ‘queer.’ In this context, Paul Boyce and Rohit K. Dasgupta’s ethnographic work on the idea of multiplicity in the modernities that contemporary non-heteronormative men occupy, perform, complicate, and aspire to can serve as an example of what I am proposing.⁸⁴ They reveal that “the relationship between modernity, queer desires, and the Indian state [...] posit the queer subject as a project of Indian modernity, one who is capable to forge love and free to live according to one’s choice.”⁸⁵

As such, the ‘gay,’ the ‘pre-gay,’ the ‘post-gay,’ the ‘queer,’ the ‘pre-queer,’ and the ‘post-queer’ concurrently co-exist and are constantly re-visited through their dialogic encounters and can, therefore, not be placed in hierarchies. The ‘gay romance’ texts that have been included, discussed, and analysed in this dissertation can be variedly situated in the locations of the ‘pre-,’ in the positions of the ‘post-,’ and in their correlations, thereby being constructive towards and informed by an idea of multivalent (and alterative) sexual modernities. As an example of this understanding, I consider the gay romance novels included in this study as being variedly located and occupying various positions within a ‘spectrum’ of multivalent (and alterative) sexual modernities (see Fig. 3 below for a model spectrum of contemporary Indian ‘gay romance’ fiction in English).

⁸⁴ See Paul Boyce and Rohit K. Dasgupta, “Utopia or Elsewhere: Queer Modernities in Small Town West Bengal,” in *Urban Utopias: Excess and Expulsion in Neoliberal South Asia*, ed. Tereza Kuldova and Mathew A. Varghese (Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 215—219.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

Fig. 3: A non-exhaustive model spectrum of contemporary Indian ‘gay romance’ fiction (novels and novellas) written in English [2003-2019 (Jan)]



In this model spectrum, I use both the terms ‘exclusive’ and ‘inclusive’ in a positive manner. By ‘gay romance’ exclusive, I mean to denote those novels that exclusively focus on same-sex romance and relationships between men; complementarily, by ‘gay romance’ inclusive, I mean to denote those novels that include some form of same-sex romance and relationships between men in a positive manner. As such, the two opposing axes that inform and help locate the ‘gay romance’ fiction in a spectrum of varied types of ‘queer’ plots also hint at an underlying politics of narrative plurality and diversifying heterogeneity in contemporary ‘gay romance’ writing in India, as evident from the diversity in the non-heteronormative plots of the texts located and positioned in a multivalent (and alterative) understanding of sexual modernities.

This project focuses on some of these novels and novellas that fall within the spectrum. The specific focus on the genre of the novel lies in the idea that the novel is dynamic, ever-changing, and discursively representative of socio-politico-cultural aspirations, more specifically so in the context of the ‘contemporary’ in the literary and the historical. According to Georg Lukacs, the “ethic of the creative subjectivity” in the generic politics of the ‘novel’ entails “the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again.”⁸⁶ As such, the ‘historico-philosophical conditioning of the novel’ does not only inform “the separation between interiority and adventure” in literature as social agent but also is “the representative art form of the age.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, according to the Bakhtinian theorisation of the status of the novel as “the only developing genre”⁸⁸ and as one that can reformulate and re-accentuate other

⁸⁶ Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of The Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: The Merlin Press, 1971), 84.

⁸⁷ See *ibid.*, 84–93.

⁸⁸ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 4.

genres⁸⁹ and produce “parodic stylizations of canonized genres and styles,”⁹⁰ writing in the ‘novel’ form can be understood to insert “an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the openended present).”⁹¹ In these theoretical contexts of the novel as a genre, the role of the ‘gay romance’ novel comes to occupy a crucial place in the analysis and the problematization of socio-cultural contemporaneity vis-à-vis sexualities and their narratives – specifically in the context of LGBTQ+ literature and literary cultures – and by extension, the processes of canon-formation. As such, I believe, the ‘gay romance’ fiction in the form of the literary novel becomes an apt candidate for a chronotopic⁹² discourse on the dynamicity of/in the ‘socio-cultural’ vis-à-vis non-(hetero)normative (and by virtue of it, challenging and transformative) contestations of/in the discourse of multivalent (and alterative) sexual modernities.

⁸⁹ See *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹² I refer to Bakhtin’s idea of the ‘chronotope’ as ‘time space’ – the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” See *Ibid.*, 84–85.

◆ **Interlude: On Loves and Spaces** ◆

Edward Soja, in his landmark work on social geographies, has suggested that there is “space per se, space as a contextual given, and socially-based spatiality, the created space of social organization and production.”⁹³ As a social product created through purposeful social interaction, then, space is both political and strategic. Thus, according to Debra Burrington, “the uses of space reveal the specific techniques through which preferred social relations are reproduced and legitimized while those not preferred are disciplined and contained.”⁹⁴

In the specific context of non-normative sexualities and same-sex interactions in space, Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta foreground the connection between sexualities and spaces in their claim that “Queer Studies is incomplete without talking about sex, the erotic dynamics within queer communities, cruising areas, social networking sites/apps, sex clubs, bathhouses [...]”⁹⁵ In their preliminary commentary, they highlight the increasing importance and need to consider non-normative sexual identities, subjectivities, and performativities in their intimate relationships with/in spaces.⁹⁶ They aver that the project of studying non-heteronormative sexualities and their cultures will be a failure “without talking about [the] sites of intimacies, of sex and romance [...]”⁹⁷

Elsewhere, Utsa Mukherjee and I have regarded intimacy between individuals as one of the most contested areas of regulation in space where they are articulated and sustained through a multitude of spatial patterning and micropractices, ranging from strands of overt

⁹³ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 79.

⁹⁴ Debra Burrington, “The Public Square and Citizen Queer: Toward a New Political Geography,” *Polity* 31, no. 1 (1998): 111.

⁹⁵ Bakshi and Dasgupta, *Queer Studies*, 15.

⁹⁶ See *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

sexual advances to those of mere conversations.⁹⁸ Given that intimacy, be it sexual or non-sexual, is permitted in both ‘private’ and ‘public’ spaces in accordance to pre-codified spatial presumptions of permissibility, we consider the case of the male homosexual as particularly interesting because of the various inter-opposing societal regulations which leave gay men in an ever-boiling pot of dilemma, self-doubt, and self-discipline when it comes to being intimate. The labour put into negotiating, establishing, and sustaining any kind of gay intimacy in public spaces comes with immense challenges and negotiations for the actors.

If it can be assumed that the idea of romantic love is already always embedded in and correlative to an idea of intimacy (bodily and otherwise),⁹⁹ spaces of intimacies function as key markers of how romance can be consumed, constructed, and negotiated. The crux of this dissertation is located at this understanding of non-heteronormative sexualities and non-heteronormative relations, specifically in the context of queer spaces, geographies of queer sexualities and desires, and their intimate, intricate, and inextricable intersections vis-à-vis the idea of ‘gay romance.’

⁹⁸ Utsa Mukherjee and Anil Pradhan, “The Closet in the Public Space: Homosexuality and Intimacy in the City of Kolkata,” paper presented at Indiana University’s Annual Gender Studies Graduate Student Association (GSGSA) Conference on ‘Regulating Intimacy,’ Bloomington, U.S.A., September, 2015.

⁹⁹ See Giddens, *Intimacy*, 45, 62, and 94.

II. On Queer Spaces: Geographies of Sexualities and Cartographies of Desires

In Western academic circles, the discourses surrounding the field of ‘cultural geography’ (particularly in the US) have traditionally been focused on the politics of physicality and materiality of spaces rather than the location of human cultures and their agential negotiations in such spaces, making the idea of ‘cultural geography’ both limited and restrictive in terms of its expected aims vis-à-vis the dynamicity of ‘culture’ and socio-cultural entities. In this context, the legacy of Carl O. Sauer and the Berkeley School of cultural geography is one such example.¹⁰⁰ In its traditional emphasis on a ‘super-organic approach’¹⁰¹ that looks at the cultural domain as more institutional and less individual, the lack of/in cultural geography in terms of the analyses of human social structures and cultural constructs resulted in a short-sightedness towards the multiplicitous problematic that ‘culture’ can entail.¹⁰²

However, from the 1960s onwards, there was a ‘discursive displacement’ in terms of conceptualising ‘space’ and the studies of spaces in terms of topography, chorography, and geography.¹⁰³ Specifically in the 1970s and onwards, cultural geography ventured into the domains of the ‘representational’ that included insights and interrogations through and in the contexts of humanism, feminism, social and cultural theory, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and post-colonialism,¹⁰⁴ where issues of the material, the mental, the symbolic,

¹⁰⁰ For a detailed discussion on Carl Sauer and the Berkeley School of cultural geography, its essential tenets, epistemological limited-ness and ontological lack, and subsequent developments, see Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (Routledge: New York, 1989), 9–24.

¹⁰¹ See *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰² See Jon Anderson, *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 32–33.

¹⁰³ For a detailed history and discussion, see Michael R. Curry, “Discursive Displacement and the Seminal Ambiguity of Space and Place,” in *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs*, ed. Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 502–517.

¹⁰⁴ See Anderson, *Geography*, 36.

and the socio-political became focussed upon, effectively introducing the ideas of culture as ‘text’ and the ‘reading of landscapes.’¹⁰⁵ However, following the critique of the ‘representational’ politics of cultural geography due to its presupposed focus on theories,¹⁰⁶ there arose a need to look into those elements of spaces that cannot generally be represented. This gave rise to the ‘non-representational’ branch of cultural geography “with a focus on practices, on the experiences rather than the things that constitute our world” and centred on the “everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions.”¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, as Peter Jackson informs, “several geographers began to reorient the subject away from the social sciences towards the humanities,” marking what has been called a ‘humanistic turn’ in cultural geography.¹⁰⁸ Michel Foucault’s 1967 lecture on ‘heterotopia’ later published as “Of Other Spaces” (1986);¹⁰⁹ Henri Lefebvre’s theorization of the politics of the practices, constructions, representations, and contestations of social spaces in *The Production of Space* (1974);¹¹⁰ Michel de Certeau’s conceptualization of urban practices, liminal spaces and ‘spatial stories’ in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984);¹¹¹ and Edward W. Soja’s framing of the concepts of spatialization and socio-spatial dialectic in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989)¹¹² and of ‘thirdspace’ and ‘the trialectics of spatiality’ in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and*

¹⁰⁵ See *Ibid.*, 36–38.

¹⁰⁶ See *Ibid.*, 39–40.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ Jackson, *Maps*, 20.

¹⁰⁹ See Michel Foucault (auth.) and Jay Miskowicz (trans.), “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.

¹¹⁰ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), 68–168.

¹¹¹ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91–110, 115–130.

¹¹² See Soja, *Geographies*, 43–93.

other Real-and-Imagined Places (1996)¹¹³ came as major representatives of and contributions to the ‘humanistic turn’ in understanding, interrogating, and problematizing ‘space.’

In the context of the focus on literary analyses of cultural space, examples such as John Barrell’s analyses of the geographies in Thomas Hardy’s novels offered the changing focus of cultural geography, ushered in by the humanistic turn in the last two decades of the 20th century, on literatures of human spaces, cultures, and their representation.¹¹⁴ However, as Peter Jackson highlights, the geographer’s interest in literature has only exemplified cultural geography’s lack of focus on the symbolic and ‘imaginative geographies of the mind’ in literary spaces and their inter-relation to the real world.¹¹⁵ Jackson’s call for the need and necessity for cultural geography and geographers of culture to actively delve into the ‘cultural’ aspects of spaces from a humanistic approach makes me question what can be and has been done the other way round: how can/have practitioners of the humanities perceive(d), theorise(d), interrogate(d), and problematise(d) the inter-relations among human cultures, geographical spaces, and literary representations?

Highlighting the serious, and worrying, lack in contemporary studies of spaces and their politics in relation to sexualities, David Bell pointed out in 1991 that “despite an ever-increasing awareness of the need to both recognise and study marginalised groups in contemporary society from, inter alia, a geographical perspective, there remain two ‘minority groups’ which have been neglected by geographers: lesbians and gay men.”¹¹⁶ In the context of gender, sexuality, and spaces, David Bell and Gill Valentine’s edited volume on the ‘mapping of desires’ in ‘queer geographies’ stands as one of the most important interventions

¹¹³ See Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), 1–23, 53–82, 96–183.

¹¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 21–22.

¹¹⁵ See *Ibid.*, 22

¹¹⁶ David Bell, “Insignificant Others: Lesbian and Gay Geographies,” *Area* 23, no. 4 (1991): 323, also, see 327–328.

in terms of an inter-disciplinary approach to the inter-relations between spaces and sexualities in recent times. While highlighting the overarching lack in cultural geographers' works on the nexus between spaces and sexualities, they also chart out the recent developments in terms of the emerging field of 'geographies of sexualities,' and more importantly the interventions provided by humanities and culture studies and their various contributions, shortcomings, and problematic, specifically in terms of interrogating the being and the doing of sexualities in space in general, of queer communities, lives, and performances in both urban and rural spaces in particular, and of spilling onto other critical and intersectional socio-political issues such as nation, citizenship, health, sex work, etc. in addition.¹¹⁷ In the Indian context, Carmel Christy's research on the intersectional and discursive relations between sexuality and public spaces and print media – vis-à-vis women's issues, rights, and visibility – in post-1990s Kerala, where she highlights "the integral role that sexuality plays not just in the constitution of the cultural sphere but also in the structuring of the socio-political realm,"¹¹⁸ is an example of such an interrogative framework that considers the geographies of sexualities in contemporary times.

For Bell and Valentine, the concept of 'queer space' discursively and practically concerns the constructs and politics of spatiality and sexualities converging with sexual performativity and contingency.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Michael Brown and Larry Knopp's arguments for 'queer geographies' provide a crucial framework for the re-consideration of space and spatial politics vis-à-vis the production and performance of non-heteronormative sexualities. In their concisely nuanced introduction to and lucidly discussed outline and recommendations for the emerging field of 'queer geography,' the politics of the interplay of cultures, subjectivities, and power dynamics feature as the key element of the construction,

¹¹⁷ See David Bell and Gill Valentine, "Introduction: Orientations," in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), 4–11.

¹¹⁸ Carmel Christy, *Sexuality and Public Space in India: Reading the Visible* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2017), 3.

¹¹⁹ See *Ibid.*, 16–17.

reproduction, and resistance of queer sexualities.¹²⁰ Underscoring the ontological lack in investigations into and theorisation of queer sexualities in traditional geographers' works, they claim that the need for a 'queer geography' scholarship has only recently risen and has managed to problematise notions and inter-relations of geography, geopolitics and sexuality to some extent. What stands out the most in their argument on the politics of 'queer geographies' is the contention that "queer geographies should not be equated solely with geographies of queerness (or non-heterosexuality)," that "[q]ueerness is as much an intellectual and epistemological perspective as a set of subjectivities organized around sexuality."¹²¹

When considered in this critical framework, Christopher Reed's theorisation of 'queer spatiality' comes as an important intervention. He points out that within the idea of a 'queer space' engendered by and constructed within the ontological problem of being an oxymoron, queerness represents "an ineffable ideal of oppositional culture" that is "so fluid and contingent" that queer spatiality cannot be located and concretised.¹²² In his discussion and analyses of 'queer' landscapes, art installations, and architecture in the American context, Reed ponders over the idea that 'queer space' is more constructed/constituted by/in the personal 'queer'-ness and the sexual performativity of 'queer' bodies than located in/localised by the non-personal 'given'-ness and spatial permissibility of 'queer'-ed spaces, but that which also problematises the unidirectional focus on the collective politics of such 'queer spaces.'¹²³ He proposes that queer space is "imminent" – it looms over, is ready to become, and even threatens to materialise its spatiality; in other words, "queer space is in the

¹²⁰ See Michael Brown and Larry Knopp, "Queer Cultural Geographies – We're Here! We're Queer! We're Over There, Too!," in *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, ed. Kay Anderson et al. (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 313.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹²² Christopher Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," *Art Journal* 55, no. 4, (1996): 64.

¹²³ See *Ibid.*, 64–65.

process of, literally, *taking place*, of claiming territory.”¹²⁴ This idea of the ‘imminence’ of queer space – of its ‘taking place’ – can be considered a key issue in the cultural understanding of space vis-à-vis sexuality and vice versa; located within and constructed through the politics of personal performance, communal cohesion, and sexualised queering of geography, the idea of the ‘queer space’ has always been crucial to the understanding and mapping of same-sex desires, intimacy, and relations. Additionally, Jean-Ulrick Désert proposes, “queer space crosses, engages, and transgresses social, spiritual, and aesthetic locations, all of which is articulated in the realm of the public/private, the built/unbuilt environments.”¹²⁵

However, Reed warns that the politics of the ‘queer space’ must dissuade its own construction and perception from being homogenous and exclusivist where the process of ‘othering’ makes such spaces more restrictive rather than liberating. Similarly, Gordon Brent Ingram claims that “[c]ities and more natural terrains have supported layered and often contradictory social transactions related to queer communality, love, and sex that involve and are between sites;” in this context, the “cumulative interactions and the associated environmental constraints and opportunities can be called the “queerscape.””¹²⁶ In a similar understanding, Zaid Al Baset’s claim (in an Indian context) that “spaces are always already polymorphous and that sexual eclecticism is made possible by the multiplicity of angles from

¹²⁴ Ibid., 65.

¹²⁵ Jean-Ulrick Désert, "Queer Space," in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 20.

¹²⁶ Gordon Brent Ingram, "Marginality and the Landscapes of Erotic Alien(n)ations," in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 28–29. Ingram states, “[Q]ueerscape is not only a landscape with sexual minorities. A queerscape is also an aspect of the landscape, a social overlay where the interplays between assertion and marginalization of sexualities are in constant flux and the space for sexual minorities is ‘decentered;’ in terms of increasingly supporting stigmatized activities and identities.” Ibid., 40–41. Furthermore, it is “a cumulative kind of spatial unit, a set of places, a plane of subjectivities constituting a collectivity, which involve multiple alliances of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transsexuals and which support a variety of activities, transactions, and functions.” Ibid.

which a space can be looked at”¹²⁷ stands as a relevant contribution in the recent past. The concept of ‘looking’ at and within a particular space is essential to the construction and understanding of the boundaries, politics, and agency of that space; this is expressly crucial in the context of the complex interrelations between space and sexuality – in the understanding of what can be understood as ‘queerscapes.’

But why does the idea of the imminent ‘queer space’ or contingent ‘queerscapes’ matter in terms of the literature that deals with same-sex intimacies, relations, and romances? More importantly, how does the politics of spatiality inform, construct, and problematise the notions of sexualities and their performance-laden manifestations of desiring and romance invest in and function within the literary ‘queer space’ of ‘gay romance’ fiction? In the context of what can be termed ‘imaginative geographies,’ several cultural geographers in the past few years “have turned increasingly to expressive or imaginative forms including the textual geographies of film, literature, and art;”¹²⁸ some have especially made contributions to the study of the geographies of sexualities. In a complementary context, literary and cultural criticism have also responded to the need to consider LGBTQ+ literature and their representation of/in spatial politics in tandem and in correlation. For example, GerShun Avilez’s analysis of Samuel Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) and Darieck Scott’s *Traitor to the Race* (1995) focuses on, explicates, and problematises the constructs of ‘queer space’ as represented in the genre of these ‘queer’ novels. Avilez’s analysis maps “the ‘place-making practices’ that characterize queer space” and argue that

¹²⁷ Zaid Al Baset, “Queering Cityscapes,” in *Gay Subcultures and Literatures: The Indian Projections*, ed. Sukhbir Singh (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2014), 242.

¹²⁸ Richard Phillips, “Sexuality,” in *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, ed. James S. Duncan et al. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 270.

“these novels provide effective cartographies of desire that generate ‘queer space’ within the generic parameters of the novel.”¹²⁹

Foregrounded in a similar aim of looking at and reading spatiality and literature in conjunction, in this dissertation, I attempt to locate, analyse and problematise similar cartographies of queer desire that make strategic and agential use of ‘queer spaces’ of/for same-sex desiring and consumption in the context of contemporary Indian ‘gay romance’ novels in English. Specifically, the focus is on the importance and role of ‘queer spaces’ in informing, constructing, and sustaining gay romance in relation to an idea of multivalent (and alterative) sexual modernities. In the context of interrogating and analysing ‘queer spaces’ and the politics of spatiality in the novels included in the study, four key themes/issues have been focussed upon in four separate chapters as such:

- (1) public urban spaces and the politics of the metropolis vis-à-vis the strategies of same-sex desires and performativities;
- (2) private spaces and a re-visitation of the agency of the personal/cloistered claim to (be)longing to places and to lovers;
- (3) natural/rural spaces and travels and the agency that they are invested with in the context of sustaining queer love stories, relations, and romance; and
- (4) ‘other’ spaces such as the virtual online sites, the manipulated and strategic ‘private-in-the-public,’ and the spaces of remembrance that provide for a proliferation of and indulgence in queer ‘romantic’ desires.

¹²⁹ GerShun Avilez, “Cartographies of Desire: Mapping Queer Space in the Fiction of Samuel Delany and Dariack Scott,” *Callaloo* 34, no. 1 (2011): 126.

Chapter One

PUBLIC LOVING IN THE CITY: QUEER SPATIAL POLITICS IN THE METROPOLIS

Cultural geographers of ‘queer geographies’ like Michael Brown, Larry Knopp, Lawrence Knopp, Gordon Brent Ingram, etc. have pointed out that the focus of the literature of cultural geography dealing with the interactions of spaces and sexualities has been predominantly in the context of ‘the urban.’¹³⁰ In this context, texts such as Bell and Valentine’s *Mapping Desire* (1995) and Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter’s *Queers in Space* (1997) have documented, problematised, and challenged the heterosexist/normative discourses of the spatiality of cities, urbanity, and urban spaces as an increasingly ‘public’ issue. Queer spatial politics in the West, and more specifically in the Euro-American contexts, has been focussed on, agentialised by, and understood through a politics of demarcated, inhabited spaces; the literature reveals gay neighbourhoods as “spaces for the creation of distinct gay identity” and key agents in minority group politics.¹³¹ David Bell and Jon Binnie have further theorised how, following the eventual transformation of the queer politics and its effects on national politics, the issue of ‘sexualised spaces’ has come to occupy a key position in terms of economy, consumption, citizenship, and governance in the form of queer tourism, global gay cities, and the ‘new urban order.’¹³²

¹³⁰ See Michael Brown and Larry Knopp, “Queer Cultural Geographies – We’re Here! We’re Queer! We’re Over There, Too!,” in *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, ed. Kay Anderson, Mona Domosh, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 317. Also see Lawrence Knopp, “Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis,” in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), 136.

¹³¹ Tim Davis, “The Diversity of Queer Politics and the Redefinition of Sexual Identity and Community in Urban Spaces,” in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), 259.

¹³² See David Bell and Jon Binnie, “Authenticating Queer Space: Citizenship, Urbanism and Governance,” *Urban Studies* 41, no. 9 (2004): 1807–1820.

Brown and Knopp inform that in the past two decades or so, “attention began to be paid to the erotic significance of urban public space, [and] conflicts over how space is constructed, coded and used through sexualized performances.”¹³³ Knopp’s own discussions on the intersections of sexuality and urban spaces project the idea that the sexuality of the city can be “described as an eroticisation of many of the characteristic experiences of modern urban life [...]”¹³⁴ Contextually, the processes of the ‘sexual coding’ of urban spaces “emphasise both erotic and more functional conceptions of sexuality,” are “connected to power relations,” and are “fiercely contested.”¹³⁵ Though situated in the context of Western urban spaces, his core argument that “the various sexual codings associated with cities are sites of multiple struggles and contradictions,” and that they are “instrumental in producing, reproducing and transforming both social relations of various kinds (including sexual relations), and space itself”¹³⁶ is relevant in the context of how ‘queer spaces’ and ‘queer sexualities’ can be understood and problematised vis-à-vis, and in relation to, their representations, contingencies, and dynamism.

Given the politics of secrecy and restrictions put in place in the context of sexual acts pertaining specifically to sexual minorities in the public, it becomes important to focus on the realm of the sexual in the public to decode the queering of spaces as a form of resistance and agency. I find Jean-Ulrick Desert’s claim rather interesting in this context:

Our cities and landscapes double as queer spaces [...] The most active doubling of space is in the public space. The square, the streets, the civic centers, the malls, the highways are the place of fortuitous encounters and juxtapositions. [...] The public place is the place of romance, seen as landscape, alleys, and cafes.¹³⁷

¹³³ Brown and Knopp, “Geographies,” 317.

¹³⁴ Knopp, “Space,” 138.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³⁷ Desert, “Space,” 21–22.

In the Indian context, research carried out by Lawrence Cohen,¹³⁸ Chandra S. Balachandran,¹³⁹ Paul Boyce,¹⁴⁰ Gayatri Reddy,¹⁴¹ Parmesh Shahani,¹⁴² and Zaid Al Baset¹⁴³ in Indian cities have similarly revealed how such geographies of sexualities and of same-sex desires in the metropolis help initiate, sustain, negotiate, and problematise the intimate relations between multivalent non-normative sexualities and the spaces that they occupy.¹⁴⁴ A recent issue in TARSHI's *In Plainspeak* on 'Public Space and Sexuality' has reflected on the continual importance of this particular relationship and provides a plethora of insights, narratives, and commentaries on how intimately related issues of space and non-heteronormative sexualities are in contemporary contexts.¹⁴⁵ The doubling, or rather the multiplicitous pluralising, of the public space involving the partaking in public intimacy and sexual activities is also portrayed and presented as a fundamental textual component of the

¹³⁸ Presenting insights into the literary examples of culturally and politically sustained homosociality in contemporary India, Cohen's article delves into the world of what he terms 'Secret Literature' in North India – a special kind of literary genre in the city of Benaras (now Varanasi) that includes homosexually instigating caricatures, poetry, pornography, etc. with socio-political intent. The discussion on same-sex male desires and homosocial liaisons in the context of the festival of Holi and *kavi sammelans* shows how the literary spaces function vis-à-vis same-sex eroticism with an underlying politics of power. See Leonard Cohen, "Holi in Benaras and the *Mahaland* of Modernity," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2 (1995): 399–424.

¹³⁹ In the context of what he terms the emerging 'gay spaces' in the city of Bangalore (now Bengaluru), Balachandran has commented upon the discursive ways in which such spaces of same-sex interactions and negotiations have come to denote non-ghettoised, but hierarchical and stratified through class, constructs and situations of homosociality and non-heteronormative sexual identities and subjectivities, vis-à-vis both physical, virtual, and community-based spaces. See Chandra S. Balachandran, "A Preliminary Report on Emerging Gay Geographies in Bangalore," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 24. no.1 (2001): 103–118.

¹⁴⁰ In problematising the stereotypical/heteronormative narratives that have re-presented the city of Calcutta (now Kolkata) to the public discourse, Boyce's ethnographic investment into the 'cruising areas' and 'queer spaces' of the city teases out the non-essentialist perceptive, performative, and negotiative aspects of the construction and sustenance of non-normative 'interstitial' spatiality in the context of same-sex interactions between men in such queer geographies. See Paul Boyce, "(Dis)locating Male-to-Male Sexualities in Calcutta: Subject, Space and Perception," in *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), 399–416.

¹⁴¹ Reddy's work on *kothis* and *panthis*, their sexual subjectivities and experiences, and their problems and negotiations in the city of Hyderabad reveals a plethora of deep ways in which spaces and sexualities are always already inter-linked and inter-twined. See Gayatri Reddy, "Sexual Differences and Their Discontents: Shifting Contexts of 'Thirdness' in Hyderabad," in *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), 301–322.

¹⁴² Using a combination of multi-sited ethnography, textual analysis, historical documentation and memoir writing, Shahani's research provides various macro and micro perspectives on what being 'gay' means in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) and how negotiations among locality, globalisation, sense of identity as well as a feeling of community within the online/offline world intersect with and inform ideas of queerness in India. See Parmesh Shahani, *Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (Be)longing in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2008).

development of various forms of same-sex erotic relations and romantic relationships in the novels. Also, agreeing with Zaid Al Baset in the understanding that the “sexuality of a space is contingent on the specific forms of interactions that actors ‘perform’ therein at specific points in time,”¹⁴⁶ I find that the performative politics of queering spaces and simultaneously consuming them for same-sex desiring and romancing matter especially in the context of public spaces.

It is crucial and interesting to note how the idea of public-ness and performance embedded in such ‘queer spaces’ matter in the context of the desires bordering the indulgence in same-sex eroticism and the presumptive need to maintain secrecy in socio-legal contexts. More than an idea of queer risk-taking, the queering of public spaces manifests itself as an assertive challenging of spatial politics of the normal and a transformative negotiation with the permissible, specifically targeting and centring non-heteronormative desires, love, and romance between men. Furthermore, Al Baset claims that such “urbanscapes create ‘fictive’ contexts which foreground queer tales, where spaces emerge out of non-space, where desire, identity and bodies are in a permanent state of flux [...]”¹⁴⁷ Ravish Kumar’s novel *A City*

¹⁴³ Theorizing upon the ‘sexuality’ of ‘spaces,’ Al Baset’s narrativised observations, discussions, and conversations with gay men and their erotic and sexual liaisons in queer spaces in/of the Indian metropolis – Kolkata and New Delhi – comments upon the agency of the interstitial space of same-sex pleasure that exists between the visibly homosocial and the invisible homoerotic in such male-to-male geographies. See Al Baset, “Cityscapes,” 234–246.

¹⁴⁴ In fact, in the context of what she terms ‘India’s Queer Revolution,’ Ira Trivedi goes as far as to claim that as part of a ‘sexual revolution’ that India is witnessing at the present moment, homosexuality and same-sex sub-cultures have come to occupy a major role and that urban public spaces have come to matter crucially. See Ira Trivedi, *India in Love: Marriage and Sexuality in the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014), 71–102.

¹⁴⁵ See Smita Vanniyar, “Where Do I Go?,” *In Plainspeak: A Digital Magazine on Sexuality in the Global South* April (2019) where she, as a non-binary person assigned female at birth, discusses her personal experiences with discrimination and otherisation in public spaces in Mumbai. Also see Feminism in India, “Let’s Talk About Alternative Safe Spaces for Queer Women in India,” *In Plainspeak: A Digital Magazine on Sexuality in the Global South* April (2019) that discusses the need for and importance of non-traditional safe spaces for ‘queer’ individuals in India. Also see “Being Queer in a Delhi Campus: Plenty Pride Marches but not Enough Mechanism to Sustain it,” *In Plainspeak: A Digital Magazine on Sexuality in the Global South* April (2019) that discusses the issues of sensitisation, safety, and inclusion in the campus’ spaces at the University of Delhi.

¹⁴⁶ Al Baset, “Cityscapes,” 240–241.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

Happens in Love (2018)¹⁴⁸ foregrounds a similar understanding of how the metropolitan and romantic are often inextricably intertwined in an inter-play of identities, subjectivities, relations, and locations. Similarly, in the novels included in this study, the erotic politics of queer spatiality manifests itself in the form of the negotiation, manipulation, and consumption of public-communal spaces such as men’s toilets; pubs, bars, and restaurants; roads and alleys; and public parks, gardens, and *maidans*.

1.1 – Men’s Toilets

Depicting an example of doing Queer Culture Studies, Pramod K. Nayar mentioned how Rao’s *The Boyfriend* “presents a geography of gay sexuality,” specifically in the context of the city;¹⁴⁹ however, he does not elaborate further upon this understanding of queer spatial connotations and politics. As depicted in *The Boyfriend*, the public toilets of urban Mumbai function as spaces for homosexual men (both closeted and otherwise) to indulge in queer sexual activities, strategically hidden from the homophobic surveillance of the society-state, albeit by being situated in a space of liminality¹⁵⁰ that provide a “plurality of alternatives.”¹⁵¹ The spatial politics embedded in the novel transpires a hidden world of queer sexual desires and performance. Such spaces in the metropolis have been the focus of the representations of same-sexual performance and interactions in other examples of contemporary queer Indian

¹⁴⁸ Translated from the Hindi *Ishq Mein Shahar Hona* (2015) by Akhil Katyal,

¹⁴⁹ See Pramod K. Nayar, “Queering Culture Studies: Notes towards a Framework,” in *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007), 140—141.

¹⁵⁰ I refer to the idea of ‘liminality’ as theorised upon by Victor Turner who, in the context of studying social processes and cultural systems within the field of experiential anthropology, claims that “the essence of liminality is to be found in its release from normal constraints, making possible the deconstruction of the ‘uninteresting’ constructions of common sense, the ‘meaningfulness of ordinary life,’ discussed by phenomenological sociologists, into cultural units which may then be reconstructed in novel ways.” Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*, ed. Edith L. B. Turner (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 160. Also see *Ibid.*, 162—164.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

literature in English too, like Neel Mukherjee's *Past Continuous* (2009) and Jerry Pinto's *Murder in Mahim* (2017).

The gay cruising spots, such as the Churchgate station loo in *The Boyfriend*, provide spatial possibilities for 'queer' men to remain in the shadows of the filth-infested stench of invisibility and yet sustain subcultures of same-sex desires and interactions cutting across class and caste identities. It is here that Yudi first meets Milind and where the gay gaze of Yudi objectifies the working-class youth of the Dalit boy. The privileged position of Yudi plays out in conjunction with his conviction that the lowliness of the Churchgate station loo is inadvertently linked to its predominantly working-class visitors. Even the sketches on the walls of the toilet, which he considers as representative of working-class mentality, speak to him in a language of a marginalised socio-economic other-ness. The narrative also reveals the internal politics and working of the 'queer space' of the men's loo in its discussion of the toilet's two sections – one the straight, and the other 'the gay wing' – and of the general knowledge of the space's covert use for same-sex activities by the non-queer visitors, workers, and authorities.¹⁵² The access to such covert queer spaces in the urban landscape helps gay men such as Yudi and Milind in mapping his 'other'-ness in context.

In their queer manipulation and access to such queer spatial possibilities, the men function, as Michel de Certeau theorises it, as a sort of queer "ordinary practitioner[s] of the city," who makes "use of spaces that cannot be seen" and partakes in a queer space "shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces."¹⁵³ In a de Certeauan reconstruction of the intersectional Indian urban space, both Yudi and Milind consume a sexual performativity that navigates through the gaze of the heteronormative and manages to functionalise re-spatialisation of queer desires in a queer urbanity. This, however, is

¹⁵² See R. Raj Rao, *The Boyfriend* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003), 6.

¹⁵³ de Certeau, *Practice*, 93.

problematized by the intersectional act itself – Milind and Yudi belong to different class and caste strata, resulting in a spatial belonging that is at once effected through a palimpsestic subjectivity of the queer geopolitics and by a repetition of the possibilities provided by the strategies of liminality — inducing into multiply queer performances a reality that has to be eventually confronted, and that which promulgates into what de Certeau terms ‘spatial capitulation.’¹⁵⁴

Ingram claims that his concept of the ‘queerscape’ “is directly linked to an expanding framework for understanding marginality” where he envisions it “as a landscape of erotic alien(n)ations, ones that shift with demographics, social development, political economies, interventions of the state, aesthetics, and desire.”¹⁵⁵ However, the contingent ‘queerscape’ of the men’s toilet and its space of same-sex desiring and performances provide a different view of marginality and alienation. Despite the marginal identity of the queer Dalit Milind, he is not rendered completely non-agential. The novel employs strategic subversions, questioning, and even parodying of dominant socio-cultural structures and institutions which bear down upon the queer characters, especially Milind, with shackles of marginalisation. The first examples are that of the liminal space(s) of the Churchgate toilet and Mumbai’s suburban trains, that function as ‘heterotopic spaces,’ where cross-class, cross-caste, and cross-religion homosexual activities are made possible.

Foucault defines the heterotopic space as ‘counter-sites’ in which “the real sites, and all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted,” making them the kind of places that “are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.”¹⁵⁶ The heterotopic space of the

¹⁵⁴ See de Certeau, *Practice*, 99 for his theorisation of the agency of the potential liminality of and in urban spaces.

¹⁵⁵ Ingram, “Marginality,” 31.

¹⁵⁶ Michel Foucault (auth.) and Jay Miskowiec (trans.), “Spaces,” 24.

public toilets, and additionally the suburban trains of Mumbai which Yudi travels in, provide a possibility of queer performativity which renders problematised the margins of caste, class, religion, age, and sexuality in the mainstream society. Though the stench of the toilets offends the privileged sensibility of gay men like Yudi, he nonetheless accepts both the agency and the necessity of the lowly toilet space for the sustenance of queer subcultures cutting across socio-cultural strata:

The stinking places were always humming with erotic activity. Orgies in the dark, amidst piss and shit. The foul smell, somehow, made the sex more enjoyable. Having spent so much of his life in the loos Yudi had come to the conclusion that there was indeed something sensual about filth.”¹⁵⁷

Yudi’s queerly sensual relationship with the marginal space of the stinking public toilets and the possibilities of queer encounters that they provide could also be understood as, what Julia Kristeva terms, the ‘Abject.’ Referring to Kristeva’s discussions on abjection in *Powers of Horror* where she designates that “which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement [is] literally rendered ‘Other,’” Judith Butler claims that the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ are always implicated in each other.”¹⁵⁸ Therefore, though Sucheta Mallick Choudhuri states that “the engagement of the urban locus for homoerotic pleasure which makes Yudi’s spectrality a possibility also makes his marginal status real,”¹⁵⁹ the access to and strategic manipulation of queer urban interstitial spaces that sustain homoerotic pleasure implicate the *gay flaneur*, like Yudi, within a subversive politics of same-sex performativity that, as Jean-Ulrick Desert would say, ‘activates’ the zone of the queer space,¹⁶⁰ through his wandering and lurking in such spaces of same-sex desires.

¹⁵⁷ Rao, *Boyfriend*, 28.

¹⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York City: Routledge, 2002), 170.

¹⁵⁹ Sucheta Mallick Choudhuri, “Transgressive Territories: Queer Space in Indian Fiction and Film,” PhD diss. (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2009), 77.

¹⁶⁰ See Desert, “Space,” 21.

Though David Bell reminds us that the general perception of what he terms the ‘public (homo)sex’ “runs against many societal constructs of intimacy, with the casual anonymous encounter being thought of as the very antipathy to the romantically charged model of sexual love,”¹⁶¹ the space of the men’s toilet in *The Boyfriend* does not restrict male-to-male sexual liaisons to mere bodily gratification operating in a presumptive code of negative queer sexual licentiousness. It is also in such a queer space that Yudi meets Milind and from where their relationship initiates, blurring and mocking the margins that separate class, caste, and religion in the general-alised Indian socio-cultural discourse of heteronormative power structures. This re-presentation of the ‘queer space’ of the men’s public toilets provide for an insight into a queer-ed approach to the issue of spatial interactions.

Yudi, who generally “couldn’t stand the smell of the grime that emanated”¹⁶² from the bodies of the working class men that he used to pick up from the toilets, now finds feelings of infatuation towards the Dalit ‘other.’ In fact, when he is masturbating in the bathroom of his house, he (subconsciously?) thinks of Milind and ponders over the idea of what constitutes love and what makes a lover.¹⁶³ His changed attitudes towards Milind speak of a challenging of the hetero-patriarchal norms that bind the mentality of cit(y)zens when it comes to issues of inter-caste, inter-class, and inter-religion relationships vis-à-vis sexual spatiality and spatial liminality. Furthermore, this presents an idea – a construct rather – of romance that is queer and is queered by/in/through the liminal spatial agency of/in the metropolitan. It may also be understood through the framework of what Anthony Giddens

¹⁶¹ David Bell, “Perverse Dynamics, Sexual Citizenship and the Transformation of Intimacy,” in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), 280.

¹⁶² Rao, *Boyfriend*, 29.

¹⁶³ See *Ibid.*, 39.

theorises as ‘pure relationship’¹⁶⁴ Though, it may seem problematic in terms of boxing same-sex desires and sexual interactions between men in public spaces in his construct of gay ‘episodic sexuality,’¹⁶⁵ in spaces of same-sex intimacy, the construct of the contingent queer romance made possible by such alterative spaces as the men’s toilets speaks of a positive paradigm regarding potentially agential queer sexual and emotional relationships.

1.2 – Pubs, Bars, and Restaurants

It is not just the openly public spaces that provide an alterative potential for queer actors; agential access to semi-public spaces such as restaurants and pubs/clubs have also been represented through a politics of spatial queerness. As a production of the consumerist branding of certain class-specific spaces that provide for and even aid in celebrating non-heteronormativity, the ‘pleasure geographies of gay nightlife’¹⁶⁶ in pubs and bars have become staple elements in most literary narratives of urban same-sex desiring, eroticism, and consumption.¹⁶⁷ Contemporary examples of ‘gay romance’ fiction have also included such spaces in their narratives in crucial ways in interrelating spaces, sexualities, and romances intimately.

¹⁶⁴ Giddens theorises a ‘pure relationship’ as a “generic restructuring of intimacy” and as “a situation where social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.” See Giddens, *Intimacy*, 58.

¹⁶⁵ Giddens theorises ‘episodic sexuality’ as “a positive form of everyday experiment” and that “permits power only in the form of sexual practice itself: sexual taste is the sole determinant.” *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶⁶ See Bell, “Others,” 324 where he discusses the politics of the spaces of homosexual and queer leisure activities in the urban contexts of the West.

¹⁶⁷ The numerous ‘gay’/‘queer’ specific and inclusive/friendly and pubs and bars in many Indian cities stand testimony to the increasing spatial accommodations and assertions; Kitty Su, Neos, Café Leopold, The Ghetto Club, The Voodoo Club, in Mumbai; Kitty Su, PDA, and Pegs ‘n’ Pints in New Delhi; Pinky Sky Bar in Bengaluru; and Ginger in Kolkata are few examples. Furthermore, ‘queer’ restaurants and cafés have also sprouted in the metropolis that function as ‘safer’ spaces that facilitate non-heteronormative same-sex and cross-sex interactions, camaraderie, solidarity, and community-building; ‘queer’-centric and ‘queer’-inclusive spaces like Amra Odbhuth Café and Collective in Kolkata, Chez Jerome – Q Café in New Delhi, Q Tube Café and Third Eye Café in Mumbai, and The Humming Tree in Bengaluru function as ‘queer’-positive spaces offering coffee, company, and community. Also see Trivedi, *Love*, 97–99 where she narrates the experiences of her ‘gay’ respondent at Pegs ‘n’ Pints in New Delhi.

For example, in *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn*, the gay men partake in same-sex intimacy of a certain kind and to a certain degree while on a double date in a ‘normal’ pub named Vintage. Despite apprehensions that they might be watched by onlookers, the protagonists Saaransh and Akshay regard each other with expectant desires.¹⁶⁸ Saaransh and Akshay enquire the gay couple about their relationship, problems of a typical gay love-life, and receive an assertive assurance of the possibility of gay romance and viability of a gay coupledness in the restaurant’s space itself. It is not just the tangibility of the idea of gay romance that arrests the minds of Saaransh and Akshay after this episode but more crucially the ability of loving and talking about same-sex love in the public space – it not only assures but also asserts.

Similarly, in *The Boyfriend*, at the Iranian restaurant Café Volga, Yudi and Milind negotiate intimacy in a manner that transforms the spatial dynamics into one that allows and sustains gay romance, desires, and intimacy. Whenever the waiter leaves, the couple “resume their smooching, letting go only when they heard heavy steps treading up the stairs.”¹⁶⁹ Though interrupted in nature, this queer intimacy posits in the space of the restaurant a homoeroticism that informs its memory and outlook; it is exactly due to this queer possibility that Yudi and Milind visit such spaces. It is also in this very space that Yudi and Milind act upon their sexual desires when Yudi fellates Milind under the table in a discrete manner. When Milind voices his surprise and concern at this act, Yudi repeats a much famous byword: “This is Bombay, my love,”¹⁷⁰ hinting at the queer possibility that the metropolitan space can provide to them. These episodes at the café are representative of what, elsewhere, I have explored regarding the varied, and often conflicting, ways in which queer intimacies are

¹⁶⁸ See Sahil Sood, *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn* (Raipur: Woven Words Publishers OPC Pvt. Ltd., 2016), 54.

¹⁶⁹ Rao, *Boyfriend*, 76.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 82. It is also reminiscent of the famous Hindi song titled “Yeh Hai Bombay, Meri Jaan” from the 1956 Bollywood film *C.I.D.*, sung by Mohammed Rafi and Geeta Dutt.

negotiated and sustained by gay couples in interstitial urban spaces, such as restaurants and cruising spots, in the Indian metropolis.¹⁷¹

The agency of such queer spaces that is accessed and negotiated by the couple in the gay disco-cum-bar Testosterone is also narrated in the chapter titled “Testosterone” – named after the bar itself. While “they swung their bodies to the rhythm of the music,”¹⁷² Yudi and Milind discuss the politics of cruising in this space where gay men come to quench their thirst for lust and love. Importantly, it is in this space that Milind first confesses his love for Milind. When Yudi notices Milind’s envy for Yudi’s familiarity with other gay men at the bar, Yudi finds the courage to divulge his romantic desires for Milind: “He assured him that whereas in the past he gave only his genitals to lovers, to Milind he had bequeathed his heart. ‘I love you,’ he said to him for the first time since the start of their affair.”¹⁷³ To this, Milind replies with “words he’d never said to anyone before: “I love you, Yudi.”¹⁷⁴ The space offered by Testosterone also emboldens Milind’s acceptance of the possibilities of queer intimacy and love as entailed in the instance when “Yudi kissed Milind full on the lips, the latter allowing it only because he saw everyone else kissing.”¹⁷⁵ This bequeathing of the heart, voicing of desiring, and sealing the love with a kiss mark a crucial turn in the lives of Yudi and Milind and for their gay romance, informed in the process by the spaces that they negotiate to sustain their relationship and highlighting how, as GerShun Avilez theorises, “‘queer space’ is created through intimate encounters and engagements and not through the queer body alone.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Anil Pradhan, “‘Out Gay, In-between’: Exploring the Problematics of ‘Private’ vs ‘Public’ Homosexual Identities in Kolkata,” paper presented at the Annual Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) Conference on ‘Have you Heard...?: Navigating the Interstices Between Public and Private Knowledge,’ London, U.K., October, 2016.

¹⁷² Rao, *Boyfriend*, 90.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁷⁶ Avilez, “Cartographies,” 136.

The spatial agency of the ‘queer’ bar Testosterone also features in *Lady Lolita’s Lover*, where the frequent visits of Jeevan and Sandesh weaves a part of their lives and relation in the context of the spatial possibilities and negotiations. In this very space, amidst its charm of the nightlife filled with alcohol and disco floor, that Sandesh is made acquainted with the varied facets and dynamics of queer desires and gay relations. Queer spaces such as that of Testosterone’s provide Sandesh and other characters in the novel with a sense of belonging and shelter, where they travel from far off places.¹⁷⁷

Similarly, in *Terminal Love*, south Mumbai’s pub-cum-discos serve as key spaces where same-sex interactions, networking, and negotiations among men take place in the domain of desiring and consuming pleasure. In one such pub-cum-disco, called Dungeon, that Vikram frequents, he is able to get the first glimpse of the possibilities that such spaces can provide for in terms of opportunities for same-sex interactions, voyeurism, and encounters.¹⁷⁸ In the context of the pub’s fluidity vis-à-vis sexual consumption, Vikram informs of the selective queering of such a space to suit the preferences and demands of its occupiers, testifying the fluidity entailed in the queering of spaces of desire: the “otherwise regular pub-cum-disco [...] turned into an exclusively gay haunt on Saturday nights.”¹⁷⁹ This reflects what Jean-Ulrick Desert terms the ‘seduction of the reading of space’ where “queerness [...] dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape,” where “the observer’s complicity is key in allowing a public site to be co-opted in part or completely,” and where “so compelling is this seduction that a general consensus or collective belief emerges among queers and non queers alike.”¹⁸⁰

It is also this very ‘queer space’ of seduction where Vikram meets with his paramour Sultan – a younger Afghanistani-origin man. One thing leads to the other and their interaction

¹⁷⁷ See R. Raj Rao, *Lady Lolita’s Lover* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 219.

¹⁷⁸ See Vicky Arora, *Terminal Love: A Gutsy Gay Love Story from the Pulsating Heart of Mumbai* (New Delhi: Kalamos Literary Services, 2016), 22, 24, 25 and 27.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁸⁰ Désert, “Space,” 21.

gets physically intimate and passionate as Vikram becomes “breathless with excitement, totally carried away in the heat of the moment.”¹⁸¹ Mindless of the public spectacle that they were making of their intimacy, Vikram carries on even as people start taking an interest in their public show of intimacy, showcasing the agency of same-sex interactions in such a space where, in the context of a communal consumption of queer pleasure, “some winked suggestively, while others cheered [them] on.”¹⁸² As Ingram notes about the politics of queerspaces, “[t]he places where sexual-minority identities can express themselves sexually, as well as the spaces where acts can be transformed into identities, are some of the more strategic and transformative queer spaces.”¹⁸³ Later, upon reflection, Vikram wonders if it was “the unbridled permissiveness in the disco” that led to and encourage “the heat and the passion of [his] encounter” with Sultan,¹⁸⁴ serving as a candid observation on the possibilities that such spaces of same-sex interactions provide for men who desire them in the context of other men and reflecting Jean-Ulrick Désert’s claim that queers bodies must be observed and interacted with in order to achieve the “seduction” or transformation elemental to queer zones.¹⁸⁵

Furthermore, apart from the interaction of a sexual nature, the commercial space of the pub also provides for personal discussions and sharing of thoughts – something that they actually feel comfortable in doing in a non-private space.¹⁸⁶ Richard Phillips notes regarding the construction of queer spaces, as such:

Material spaces become ‘humanized’ as spaces of community and identity in the course of individuals’ and communities’ encounters with and in them. More than simply material geographies, these places acquire meaning as they are reflected in the formation of personal and collective memories, bodily displays and performances,

¹⁸¹ Arora, *Love*, 42.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Ingram, “Marginality,” 38.

¹⁸⁴ Arora, *Love*, 46.

¹⁸⁵ Désert, “Space,” 21.

¹⁸⁶ See Arora, *Love*, 56 & 57.

desires and fantasies.¹⁸⁷

In fact, Vikram becomes much enticed by the opportunities that Dungeon provides to him and starts looking forward to the Saturday nights and occasional ‘gay parties’ with his gay friend and Sultan, falling into a routine of exploring spaces of same-sex leisure and pleasure and becoming a “part of the crowd.”¹⁸⁸ The ‘gay parties’ also reveal the ‘queer’ logic of Sultan in the context of same-sex public display of affection; when Vikram asks Sultan why he actively partook in passionately kissing him in public when at Dungeon but not in private when at the former’s flat, he replies that “*woh different hai. Gay parties mein all okay, sab chalta hai,*”¹⁸⁹ effectively proclaiming the near-Bakhtinian ‘carnavalesque’ nature, form, and construct of such a ‘queer’ space of desiring and performance at the multi-faceted pub.

Another facet of same-sex intimacy and relationship between men is portrayed in *The Other Guy* where the protagonists Anuj and Nikhil select, what they call, “a small intimate restaurant” in order to dine and discuss about their personal problems.¹⁹⁰ Their negotiations with each other and with the space for venting their arguments and concerns regarding their love relationship is depicted in a manner that is at once common place and also starkly ‘queer’ – seldom do texts describe in such details the various conversations, actions, and manoeuvrings that a gay couple must undertake in a date in as general (and taken-for-granted) a space as a restaurant. In ‘taking out’ their relationship to/in the semi-public space of a restaurant, Anuj and Nikhil provide the readers with an opportunity to intimately look into and witness what goes on in the lives of gay men in a romantic relationship beyond the stereotyped narrativisation of ‘queer’ lives and loves. In addition to the restaurant, the hostel’s canteen and a ‘dosa place’ near their college’s gate are also depicted as spaces of

¹⁸⁷ Phillips, “Sexuality,” 269.

¹⁸⁸ Arora, *Love*, 76.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁹⁰ See Aakash Mehrotra, *The Other Guy* (Mumbai: Leadstart Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2017), 145–150.

romance;¹⁹¹ in fact, Anuj provides an ingenuous term to the relationship between such spaces and gay love – “romance over dosa.”¹⁹²

In the context of their presence together as a couple in such spaces, Anuj makes a curious comment on the possibilities provided by a same-sex relationship that itself helps them evade detection as homosexuals. Anuj terms it the “luxury of gay love” where, strategically, “convention masks love as friendship.”¹⁹³ Akhil Katyal provides detailed discussions and analyses of such forms of identity politics and same-sex relations that strategically make use of duality to negotiate with and exist in the Indian social contexts. In this theorization of the idea of a ‘doubleness of sexuality,’ Katyal argues that certain idioms of same-sex identities and performativities play pivotal roles in constructing, subverting, and agentializing sexualities and same-sex interactions, desires, intimacies, and relations in ‘modern’ India.¹⁹⁴

1.3 – Thoroughfares and Alleyways

Brinda Bose’s commentary on the nation-wide ‘Kiss of Love’ protest movement in India in 2014 highlights how this public form of asserting intimacy (especially same-sex) “innovatively deployed the idea of public kissing to rebel against increasing moral policing of public [...] spaces” and, in the process, managed to “undermine the status quo of the street [...]”¹⁹⁵ This event marks one of the several ways in which same-sex desires and intimacies can be projected onto the space of the ubiquitous roads and streets to challenge the heteronormative presumptions of the city. Similarly, in the novels, the literary markers of same-sex intimacy move beyond the habitual spaces of queer intimacy located in a domain of

¹⁹¹ See *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ See chapters 1, 2 and 3 of Katyal, *Doubleness*.

¹⁹⁵ Bose, *Audacity*, 283.

the queer communal, and in the process, create new queer ‘avenues’ of romantic and sexual desiring and their fulfilment.

R. Raj Rao’s novels depict same-sex intimacy between the male characters on public roads in both covert and overt manners. In *The Boyfriend*, in their first meeting, Yudi holds Milind’s hand in public as they walk on the road and the latter responds to it in unconcerned pliancy. Maria Thomas’ article on photographer Vincent Dolman’s take on what he terms the phenomenon “delightfully unconventional” talks of this common practice of men holding hands in the public in India.¹⁹⁶ As “an interesting contrast to the West, where homophobia and cultural norms have made men of all ages uncomfortable with this kind of physical contact,” Dolman’s photographs of men holding each other’s hands on the streets of Mumbai and his conversations with them regarding their ‘normal’ way of showing affection for each other presents a case of normativised same-sex intimacy that none of the partakers think has “anything remarkable.”¹⁹⁷ Similarly, using the rhetoric of ‘This is India,’ Yudi and Milind effectively make strategic and agential use of this culture of same-sex interaction between men in the public spaces in India to indulge in their own little intimate play of hands.¹⁹⁸

Similarly, in *Hostel Room 131*, Siddharth and Sudhir partake in intimacy in public spaces, effectively making them ‘queer.’ In their first meeting, Siddharth convinces Sudhir to go out for a Bollywood film and while on their way to the cinema hall, he indulges in interactions bordering on the ‘sexual’ with Sudhir on the roads of Pune; despite the presence of people on the city’s arterial Jangli Maharaj Road, they “[tighten] the grip around each other’s neck and waist [that] automatically brought their cheeks very close,” and “from time

¹⁹⁶ Maria Thomas, “A photo series captures Indian men and their love for holding hands,” *Quartz India*, 10 Aug 2018, <https://qz.com/india/1352239/vincent-dolmans-photos-of-indian-men-holding-hands/>

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ See Rao, *Boyfriend*, 8–9.

to time, taking advantage of the crowd on the street, Siddharth let them touch.”¹⁹⁹ This form of physical interaction carries on later that night in the public – this time invested with a conscious act of appropriating the spatial potential of roads. Sudhir takes a detour to “Fergusson College Road that ran parallel to Jangli Maharaj Road” to provide his *yaar*²⁰⁰ Siddharth with better chances of fondling with him – a decision whose motive Siddharth understands pretty well, as he informs: “Fergusson College Road was much quieter at this late hour than Jangli Maharaj Road. Here, they could fearlessly resume their pornographic acts as they trekked back home.”²⁰¹ The strategic access of this road is both symbolic in its reference as a ‘parallel’ possibility for same-sex intimacy and political in its use to defy the existing penal laws that criminalise same-sex sexual acts in India, as evident in the utterance of the Hindi proverb by Siddharth that claims their right to indulge in intimacy by mutual agreement:

Siddharth did not waste a single minute. His arm became a python again, coiled around Sudhir’s neck. In turn, Sudhir involuntarily put his arm around Siddharth’s waist. The popular saying *Jab miya biwi razi toh kya karega kazi* came to Siddharth’s mind.²⁰²

Furthermore, the defiance of Siddharth and Sudhir comes in the form of their first show of affection in the public space itself – a symbolic act of challenging both the State’s and religion’s general otherisation and discrimination of queer individuals. When they arrive at “the police grounds” and stand “under a huge banyan tree,” Siddharth brings “his lips to

¹⁹⁹ Rao, *Hostel*, 36.

²⁰⁰ ‘*Yaar*’ in Hindi/Urdu means ‘friend.’ The use of this specific word is interesting as, in an other context, Katyal notes that it is one of the several idioms of same-sex desires and intimacy that men in India use and that reflects upon an idea of the doubleness of/in sexuality vis-à-vis the collation of homosocial friendship and same-sex homoeroticism. See Katyal, *Doubleness*, 161.

²⁰¹ Rao, *Hostel*, 39.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 39. The Hindi proverb *Jab miya biwi razi toh kya karega kazican* be translated in English to mean “when the husband and wife agree, what objection can the judge have?” (translation mine). Also see Vanita, *Rite*, 66. Siddharth’s reference to this specific proverb relates to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that (until September 5, 2018) criminalised same-sex sexual acts. It could also be a reference and challenge to Section 294(a) of the IPC that criminalises ‘obscene acts’ in public spaces irrespective of the person’s sexuality.

Sudhir's and they [begin] to smooch. It was a full-bloodied kiss, Siddharth inserting his tongue into Sudhir's mouth and allowing it to reach his throat."²⁰³

Depiction of certain streets and lanes as popular cruising spots for male-male sexual interaction also features in the queer geo-politics of agential liminality in urban spaces in the novels. In *Terminal Love*, for example, Vikram visits and maps the queer spaces of Mumbai during his outings at night, where in one such lane – a “promenade along the sea” referred to as “‘Walls’ [...] by those ‘in the know’,”²⁰⁴ it “was not unusual to see sailors and sluts, men and boys, and other offbeat unions formed in the seedy joints along the Causeway, and consummated within these havens of ecstasy.”²⁰⁵ Inadvertently, not all such pedestrian-centric thoroughfares of public access constitute ‘queer space,’ but it is the ‘imminent signifiers’ of queer-ness that construct such spaces of queer desires, romance, and interactions where the “context is critical to their signification of the difference implied in the process of taking place.”²⁰⁶ As Bell and Valentine comment in the context of the Butlerian agency of performing ‘queer’-ness in public spaces, “straightness of our streets is an artefact, not a natural fact, and [...] non- or antiheteronormative acts make this clear by making it queer.”²⁰⁷ Challenging the hegemonic heteronormative ‘straightness’ of streets as an ‘artefact,’ and ‘not a natural fact,’²⁰⁸ in the case of the ‘seedy joints’ formed along the Causeway in Bombay, the ‘context’ of the queer space is both constituted and informed by and materialised and sustained through certain ‘queer’ acts (of sexual intimacy), as described by Vikram as the *modus operandi* of this ‘queer space’ in his keen observation:

²⁰³ Rao, *Hostel*, 39–40. I interpret the ‘police grounds’ and the ‘banyan tree’ as representing the homophobic elements of/in the State and Hindutva respectively.

²⁰⁴ Arora, *Love*, 29.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰⁶ Reed, “Imminent,” 68.

²⁰⁷ Bell and Valentine, “Introduction,” 17.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Guys strolled up and down the cobbled promenade in groups of twos and threes, or sat around smoking along the length of the parapet. [...] [S]ome smiled invitingly, some just stared, a few *maaraod* a wink, and the more audacious among them ventured a 'hello gentlemen.'²⁰⁹

However, not all arteries-like streets in the city-space are endowed with the agency of conspicuous public-ness; the element of secrecy also functions in re-visioning the commonplace alleyways – capillaries-like but pleasurable. In their numerous outings in the city of Delhi together as two young men trying to figure out their relationship of budding romance, in *The Other Guy*, Anuj and Nikhil explore and carve out intimate niches for their interactions in the public spaces of the city. While on their dates exploring the secret lanes and culinary cultures of Delhi in their quest for both delicious food and memorable times,²¹⁰ their interaction in the public space is informed by a sensuality of same-sex intimacy portrayed by certain non-sexual, but desirous, markers: the meeting of eyes speaking of desires, the sharing of smiles shared at the realization, the brushing of hands as if by mistake, and the palpitations of excitedly beating hearts.²¹¹

Especially interesting is their keenness and interest in exploring Old Delhi together on intimate dates, riding on a motorbike through the lanes of the old quarters of the city, embracing the newfound reality of their love affair, and correlating it with the old spaces of the city themselves.²¹² Discovering and exploring the “seldom visited city within a city,” Anuj and Nikhil memorialise their romance in their ‘out’-ing on the “treasure strewn streets [...] where past lives and present dreams met in glorious fusion,” much like the possibilities of accommodated same-sex romance that the spaces offered in the present age.²¹³ In fact, when they traverse through thoroughfares and alleyways in places like Dilli Gate, Jama

²⁰⁹ Arora, *Love*, 37.

²¹⁰ See Mehrotra, *Guy*, 79.

²¹¹ See *Ibid.*, 80.

²¹² See *Ibid.*, 115–121.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 116.

Masjid, and Chandni Chowk on foot, Anuj's comments on the "urban mosaic" of this part of the city where both the old and the new, chaos and peace coexist and thrive, implicitly point out to the possibility of various sexualities, sexual relations, and loves coexisting together like the reality of juxtaposed spatial pluralities in Indian society.²¹⁴

1.4 – Parks, Gardens, and *Maidans*

In the context of the spatial politics of green spaces within the metropolis, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands claims that public parks in the city have had an implicit relation to the constructs of heteronormative sexual cultures where such 'natural' spaces, as "sites of regulated sexual contact," have served the purpose of a symbolic 'outing' for courting heterosexual couples to "'tryst' in an open space that [is] both morally uplifting and, given its visibility, highly disciplined"²¹⁵ towards performing and solidifying heterosexual/normative masculinity.²¹⁶ As such, the city's spaces are strategically co-opted in a politics of visibilizing the (hetero)sexual as not only natural but also preferable and permitted, albeit with an underlying contract of maintaining a façade of public decency. However, such spaces have also been utilised to challenge and subvert the very heteronormative constructs of the urban spatial politics; easily accessible open-spaces, such as parks, in the generally restrictive urban context, have also, ironically, provided for agential manipulation of the same for same-sex interaction and intimacy.

²¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 117.

²¹⁵ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Unnatural Passions?: Notes Toward a Queer Ecology," *Invisible Culture* 9 (2005): 17–18.

²¹⁶ See Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 13. They further inform that in the 20th century US, "wilderness spaces such as parks came to be valued as sites to be preserved away from the corrupting influences of urban industrial modernity, and in particular, as places where new ideals of whiteness, masculinity, and virility could be explored away from the influence of emancipated women, immigrants, and degenerate homosexuals." Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, "Introduction," 14.

In *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India*, Madhavi Menon highlights how, following ‘Indian’ traditions of intimate interactions manifested in public spaces in texts such as the *Kamasutra*, parks and similar public green spaces in the city were and still continue to be embedded in a “cultivation and expression of desire.”²¹⁷ In deconstructing the spatial politics of public parks in the context of same-sex intimacy, Menon’s discussion of these ‘queer spaces’ entails a drawing from the historical memories and backgrounds of the *chahar-baghs* constructed by the Mughals and location of such spaces of desire and eroticism in the contexts of contemporary politics crucially construed in its duality, as “[w]hat goes on in these parks is both hidden from sight behind bushes and visible to everyone who knows what is going on behind the bushes.”²¹⁸

Similarly, in *Hostel Room 131*, public parks feature as cruising spots and places for negotiating sex and intimacy. From walks undertaken by Siddharth and Sudhir together at Pune’s Sambhaji Park to Sidhharth’s solitary visits to various other parks in search of sexual encounters with men, similar to what Gayatri Reddy has documented as being termed ‘*ghumo-ing*’ for sex,²¹⁹ the possibilities accessible at/in such spaces speak of the agency of liminality in the ‘green’ spaces of urbanity. This ‘*ghumo-ing*’ becomes crucially important in and representative of what Ingram notes – in the specific context of the socio-economic South where “a shortage of queer indoor space is still acute” – as a “reliance on furtive night landscapes, especially for groups of men who normally pass as heterosexuals and where certain sites, at night, become the major identifiers of queerness.”²²⁰ Similarly, while terming the gratification of multi-faceted desires and intimacies, including same-sex interactions, by Indians in such parks as ‘parkophilia,’ Menon discusses one such well-known park in India –

²¹⁷ Madhavi Menon, *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2018), 169.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

²¹⁹ See Reddy, “Hyderabad,” 319–320.

²²⁰ Ingram, “Marginality,” 45.

Palika Bazar Park in New Delhi – that exhibits real-life similarities to Pune’s Sambhaji Park as depicted by Rao in his novel.²²¹

The agency of the spatial politics of this ‘queer space’ of desiring and intimacy in the park at Palika Bazar is its liminality vis-à-vis sexual obfuscation; the park, apart from being like any other park, is also a ‘queer’ park for and of men who seek out men and who are aware of its spatial politics and expected mannerisms. Similar observations provided by Al Baset reveal that the “observable markers of ‘queerness’” are crucial to the constructive negotiation in and subjective interpretation of such “gay sub terrain[s]” of desire between men.²²² Similar to Menon’s commentary on the queer spatial politics of New Delhi’s Palika Bazaar Park, Al Baset provides accounts, as a participant observer, of the various languages, gestures, and ‘frames of looking’ that form the rituals that operate within and are constitutive of the space of what people often call the ‘Gay Park.’²²³ The curious interplay between homosociality²²⁴ and homoeroticism – each re-presenting and constructing two different, but not mutually exclusive, ideas of same-sex interaction between men – reveals the permeable boundaries between both sexualities and their interactions with spaces and specifically, the politics of queer(ed) spatiality. Similarly, in his discussion of public parks as ‘queer space’ in Kolkata, Al Baset reveals, through his queer spatial ethnography, how places like Minto Park, Maidan area, and Dhakuria Lake function as both cruising and rendezvous spots for male-

²²¹ See Menon, *Desire*, 176–177.

²²² Al Baset, “Cityscapes,” 236 & 237.

²²³ See *Ibid.*, 238–239, 241.

²²⁴ I use the term ‘homosocial’ as theorised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the context of the ‘homosocial continuum’ between same-sex interactions and intimacies and homosexuality vis-à-vis games and sports among men. For a discussion on the ‘homosocial,’ also see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1–5 & 89. Also see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 15, 72, 88 & 184.

male desires and romances and also as spaces of relative refuge/sanctuary for the performance of the same.²²⁵

In the context of public homosexual negotiations, Scott Tucker has noted that “[g]ay people often have no freedom to be gay in the privacy of their homes” and that “lacking a secure privacy, they may find an insecure privacy and a selective publicity among similar seekers in [public] places.”²²⁶ Al Baset’s observation points out to a similar idea that public places like parks and gardens also provide for the desired spaces for same-sex intimacy in emotional terms that private spaces like the home is unable to provide. For example, in *Vivek and I*, Nimeta Garden in Baroda provides for a rendezvous spot for Kaushik and Krishna to converse in private the crucial issues in their failed relationship; while they hold each other’s hands, they try to reconcile the issues, but depart with the last hug and kiss as a farewell to Kaushik, making the park the only witness to such an important, albeit tragic, moment in their romantic relationship, marked by the silent tears of pain.²²⁷

Gardens also feature as spaces of passionate consumption of same-sex intimacy in *The Other Guy* when, driven by the sexual and erotic rage sparked off by an impromptu kiss on the lips, in public, Anuj and Nikhil seek shelter behind the bushes in a garden – the ‘right place’ “isolated in inky darkness” and that allows the night to unclthe their “tantalizing desires” and burst open “the floodgates of carnal desire” as they kiss each other passionately.²²⁸ The space of the public gardens is also used in more symbolic terms in *Hostel Room 131* where Siddharth, after his separation with Sudhir, dreams that they are in the Vridavan Gardens in Pune in late evening and that in the midst of flowers, fireflies, and fragrances, they “locate a little temple at the far end of the garden” where they solemnise

²²⁵ Al Baset, “Cityscapes,” 236–238.

²²⁶ Scott Tucker, “Gender, Fucking, and Utopia: An Essay in Response to John Stoltenberg’s *Refusing to Be a Man*,” *Social Text* 27 (1990): 17.

²²⁷ See Patel, *Vivek*, 293–294.

²²⁸ Mehrotra, *Guy*, 87.

their love in the form of a marriage-like ritual of exchanging a rose.²²⁹ It seems more than coincidental that, in the context of the ‘unconscious’ realm of desiring in sleep, Siddharth selects the space of the public garden for the ritualistic consummation of his love for Sudhir, for it reminds one of the *gandharva*²³⁰ marriage solemnised between Dushyanta and Shakuntala in the *Mahabharata* where with “minimal ritual implements – a simple exchange of flower garlands” in the natural setting of “the tamed wilderness of the hermitage,” though lacking public recognition, allows an intimate privacy in coming together as a couple in love.²³¹

Maidans – large public grounds – too are portrayed as open public spaces of rampant, but strategically located and performed, same-sex intimacies and sexual-erotic interactions among men. R. Raj Rao’s novels provide glimpses into this utility of the *maidans* in the city of Bombay – green spaces of (homo)sexual respite for men who have sex with men. For example, in *The Boyfriend*, Azad Maidan is depicted by Yudi as a famous cruising spot for men; he recalls that when he was young and new to the sexual geography of intimacies between men in Bombay back in the 1970s, one of his first sexual encounters with other men had taken place in this Maidan. Referred to as “his first taste of gay love,” the Maidan – “engulfed in pitch-black” – provided the optimum spatial setting for men to come together and indulge in sexual activities.²³²

The issue of the spatial agency of the queer space of the Maidan is also stated through Yudi’s keen observation and concern regarding the danger of being discovered during such ‘illegal’ acts of same-sex sexual intimacy and through his conclusive astonishment that, even

²²⁹ See Rao, *Hostel*, 26–27.

²³⁰ In the Sanskrit and Prakrit repertoire of the literature of love and romance in India, a *gandharva* marriage is one conducted/solemnised by mutual consent. It does not require aprental consent, officiant, witnesses, etc. and is considered to be the best form of marriage since it is based solely on mutual love. See Orsini, “Introduction,” 5. Also see Vanita, *Rite*, 66–67.

²³¹ Rao, *Hostel*, 26–27.

²³² See Rao, *Boyfriend*, 48.

though “the Azad Maidan Police Station is situated bang opposite,” “so much orgiastic activity went on under the noses of the cops.”²³³ Such is the impact of the Maidan’s lure for young gay men like Yudi that it becomes his regular haunt for a whole decade,²³⁴ almost becoming an overpowering addiction that sustained itself due to the very nature of the dangerous and the pleasurable in the Maidan’s spatial licentiousness that made sexual desiring and erotic loving between men possible. In the context of same-sex intimacy in such green spaces in the city as the parks, gardens, and *maidans*, a key issue emerges as the crux of the agency represented through their queer strategic utilities and re-imaginings, as Mortimer-Sandilands informs: the heteronormative understanding of the ‘public’-ness and the ‘disciplinary’-ness of such open spaces are re-visited and re-fashioned by public same-sex acts, towards a ‘democratization of space’ itself in a queer-positive paradigm,²³⁵ and “gay men’s re-appropriations of these socionatural spaces fosters an alternative and critical awareness of urban nature.”²³⁶

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ See Ibid.

²³⁵ See Mortimer-Sandilands, “Unnatural Passions?,” 22. Also see Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction,” 26.

²³⁶ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction,” 26.

Chapter Two

LOVING WITHIN FOUR WALLS: THE PRIVATE AS QUEER SPACE OF/FOR ROMANCE

Much like the ‘the personal is the political’ of second-wave feminism of the 1960s, ‘the private is the public’ has gradually become the adage in contemporary queer politics surrounding identities, sexualities, eroticisms, and rights. The space of the ‘private’ has become much sensationalised in terms of the politics of asserting individuality vis-à-vis the communal for the purpose of demanding for and accessing equality and freedom. The core of the entire debate over Section 377 can be considered as centring the issue of the expected sovereignty of sexual privacy; the Supreme Court’s detailed contentions and convictions regarding the same have recently been reflected in the meticulously worded verdicts in the “Justice K. S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India” judgement of 2017 regarding the Right to Privacy issue and most recently, in the reading down of Section 377 itself in 2018. However, in the Indian context, there remains to be considered the discursive politics of what actually constitutes and subsequently problematises the ‘private’ so as it does not translate into the ‘public’ as un-provisionally as it is perceived to be.

Christopher Reed notes that under capitalism, the “ubiquity of queer space exemplifies the expression of identity,” and though there is the assumption that queer cultures are more commercial than other forms of sexual identities and forms of expression, the stereotype of socially privileged same-sex ‘queer’ interaction in spaces like gay bars and pubs, while being distinctive as ‘queer loci,’ are not representative.²³⁷ On the contrary, as Reed claims, the location and mapping of queer spaces of desiring and consumption must

²³⁷ See Reed, “Imminent,” 66.

entail a non-centring of spatiality. The overlooked spaces of the less ‘public’/commercial and more ‘private’/inter-personal queer-ness speak of a dynamics that is often side-lined for the more ‘visible’ markers of queer spatiality and spatial politics. In this context, it is important to note that, though venturing dangerously close to a discourse of simplified binary opposition of spatial politics, I do not aim to generalise the domain of the ‘public’ vs ‘private’ differential, but rather explore the agency of the ‘private’ more in terms of the hidden world of same-sex desiring and pleasure that matter crucially in the context of ‘queer space,’ especially in the Indian context where Section 377 criminalised all forms of same-sex sexual intimacy, even in private, when these novels were written and published.

Subsequently, this chapter aims at delving into a world of ‘gay romance’ infused with, sustained by, and celebrated through a consumption of ‘queer spaces’ for queer desires and pleasures – a world that is generally not revealed in literature and that has always been cloaked in mystery and ambiguity. In these novels that openly describe, and even visually intensify and sensationalise, same-sex intimacies and love in the ‘private’ queer spaces such as the home and the boys’ hostel, the language and politics of the construction and problematisation of same-sex relations is crucial to the generic politics of the ‘gay romance.’

2.1 – Home

Agreeing with Christopher Reed who claims that though, the “designed-to-be-queer space – appropriately enough for an identity rooted in the ‘private’ sphere of sexuality – is overwhelmingly domestic space,”²³⁸ I observe that the discussion on and the theorisation of the idea of ‘queer space’ have generally neglected the space of the ‘home.’ As Richard Philips informs, the space of the ‘home,’ both as a place and an idea, “is closely linked to

²³⁸ Ibid., 68.

normative constructions of gender and sexuality” and “as a gendered space, it is fundamental to ideas about femininity and masculinity.”²³⁹ Furthermore, Jean-Ulrick Désert reminds us that “queer homes do not necessarily negate these characteristics, but rather reinterpret and often (re) appropriate them, constructing new spaces as the occupants redefine the parameters for domesticity.”²⁴⁰ In this context, it becomes imperative to understand, interrogate, and problematise the ways in which the space of the ‘home’ is queer-ed in literary narratives vis-à-vis same-sex romance and homoeroticism. In the novels pertaining to ‘gay romance’ included in this study, a major part of the politics of ‘queer space’ has been invested in the ‘queer’ agency of the home-space – represented in the access to and utility of physical spaces of/by kinship in the context of same-sex romance and intimacy. Among such spaces, the personal space of flats/rooms of gay friends, acquaintances, and partners feature as a key spatial element of/for sustaining same-sex interactions and relationships.²⁴¹

For example, in *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn*, Saaranish and Akshay are able to get intimate with each other and explore a possibility of their romantic liaison for the first time at their friends’ place. It is within the spatial agency of private spaces of similar gay men that they are seen “dancing together and embracing each other,” “[share] a kiss,”²⁴² “play with hair for a little while”²⁴³ and not feel awkward despite the other men present in the room. Similarly, in *Saraswati Park*, Ashish, who has temporarily shifted to Mumbai for his education, gets a chance to explore his sexuality and sexual desires at his classmate Sunder’s room. Ashish’s physical infatuation for Sunder gets manifested in the non-sexual, but tension-laden, description of their intimacy while reading a book: “their heads [...] were close together, and their hair touched as they shook with laughter” and “when Sunder’s fringe

²³⁹ Phillips, “Sexuality,” 273.

²⁴⁰ Desert, “Space,” 22.

²⁴¹ In her discussion on the narratives of same-sex sexual experiences and lives of gay men in urban India, Ira Trivedi mentions an example of how the home space often provides for exploration of same-sex desires and liaisons in the form of private gay parties. See Trivedi, *Love*, 71–72.

²⁴² Sood, *Dreams*, 55.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56.

mingled with Ashish's, the other boy had leaned forward slightly, and his lips [...] had brushed Ashish's."²⁴⁴ Shrouded in ambiguity, the narrator reveals later the sexual nature of this interaction between Ashish and Sunder where, behind the locked door of Sunder's air-conditioned room, they had partaken in some form of sexual intimacy and passion.²⁴⁵ The narrative reveals as much is necessary to discern about the nature of the sexual interaction between the two young men, effectively stating that their intimacy in private, despite being figuratively closeted, is their own intimate affair.

Later, Ashish and Sunder's sexual activities spill onto the edges of the private 'home' space and the public 'outside' world when Sunder, during his visit to Ashish's house, kisses Ashish and indulges in sexual intimacy with him on the terrace.²⁴⁶ As their intimacies develop into a routine, they develop a sense of sexual camaraderie that, however, doesn't go unnoticed in the public's scrutiny of it. When Sunder's servant walks in on them during one of their sexual activities, despite Ashish's reassurances, Sunder decides to arbitrarily end their relationship, showcasing the volatile nature of the private 'home' space in terms of sexuality.²⁴⁷ The agential nature of the private 'home' space is, however, re-instated in the interactions between Ashish and his private tutor Narayan; in their weekly meetings at Narayan's flat, they not only discuss issues in literature, film and art, but the space – invested with sexual tension – allows them to indulge in physical intimacy too²⁴⁸ and later, discuss the more serious issues of each other's lives.²⁴⁹ However, Narayan's flat, too, develops its own character as it witnesses the strife and eventual drifting apart of the two men; as Ashish demands for a sustainable relationship between them and as Narayan proclaims the

²⁴⁴ Joseph, *Park*, 94.

²⁴⁵ See *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁴⁶ See *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁴⁷ See *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁴⁸ See *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁴⁹ See *Ibid.*, 210.

impossibility in his discourse of cross-age same-sex relations, the flat that has defined the possibilities of their physical intimacy also gets coloured, for Ashish, in melancholy.²⁵⁰

Stuart Hall, in some other context, comments that “people who belong to more than one world, speak more than one language and inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home.”²⁵¹ The narratives of same-sex romance in the novels provide for a similar idea of multiplicity of ‘home’ – a non-homogeneity that both challenges normative (familial and national) constructs of the domestic ‘home’ space and queer it towards providing for a world of new opportunities and realities. For example, in *Terminal Love*, Vikram’s flat near the Juhu Beach area in Mumbai witnesses the gradual development of Vikram’s relationship with Sultan, through both passionate sexual intimacy and emotional interaction and intercourse.²⁵² Their routinised interaction on the weekends at the former’s flat also, eventually, leads to a familiarity that seeps into the domain of the familial – Vikram’s family, despite their reservations, “gradually understood that this was not a passing fancy for [Vikram] and began to accept [their] being together with some semblance of grace and courtesy.”²⁵³ Vikram’s home also provide temporary refuge for a desperate and hungry Sultan whenever he had a tiff with his father and was ordered to leave the house for the night,²⁵⁴ and even the possibility of a permanent live-in structure as enquired about by Sultan.²⁵⁵

Even after Sultan’s marriage to a girl, he religiously arrives at Vikram’s house for their ‘weekends rendezvous,’ and upon being asked why he is at Vikram’s when he has just been married, Sultan replies in a matter-of-fact manner: “Phir kya hua... so what yaar?,”²⁵⁶

²⁵⁰ See *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁵¹ Stuart Hall, “New Cultures for Old,” in *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*, ed. Doreen B. Massey and Pat Jess (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 206.

²⁵² See Arora, *Love*, 58–60.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁵⁵ See *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 113. As noted earlier, the idiom of *yaar* relates to the doubleness of/in sexuality, vis-à-vis the homosocial and the homoerotic in the Indian context.

hinting at the importance and permanence of the flat in Vikram and Sultan's relationship as friends and lovers. Upon this realisation, Vikram comments: "It was as if nothing had changed. We were together just like before, we drank late into the night and went to sleep in each other's arms. In this context, it becomes clear that the role of Vikram's home, in relation and in addition to the physical agency of its space, serves, by virtue of being both familiar and familial, the key role of a marker and the binder of the relationship and an alternative 'queer' form of marriage between the two men exemplified by the weekends spent together in the house, akin to a live-in relationship.²⁵⁷ Later in the novel, when both Vikram and specifically Sultan grapple with the latter's HIV+ status,²⁵⁸ Vikram's flat plays the crucial role of both a consolation and healer for Sultan and the witness for the remaining days of his relationship with Vikram. As Vikram notes, "In his own words, [Sultan] only found *sukoon*, which can at best be described as a 'deep level of mental peace and emotional succour,' during the weekends he spent at my house with me."²⁵⁹ After Sultan's death, Vikram keeps him alive in the form of a framed picture of Sultan that he hung on the wall facing his bed, perpetually memorialising the presence of and his love for Sultan within the time and the space of 'their' home.²⁶⁰

In *The Other Guy*, Anuj and Nikhil use the personal 'home' space in multiply strategic and agential manners. After their public sexual interactions, while in college, become risky for them, they use the privacy of Anuj's empty-by-day house for continuing

²⁵⁷ In the context of same-sex live-in relationships, Vanita comments on how "pre-modern Indian texts show friends spending their lives together." Vanita, *Rite*, 162. In fact, she also claims that "modern male-female marriage [...] acquires its ideals of friendship not from a heterosexual model but from the model of same-sex friendship." *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁵⁸ *Terminal Love* is, perhaps, only the second novel/novella in English written by an Indian author that deals with AIDS and includes a major 'gay' character who is HIV+. The first one was *The Lost Flamingoes of Bombay* (2009) by Siddharth Dhanvant Sanghvi. The other non-literary texts that come to mind are Onir's film *My Brother ... Nikhil* (2005) and Sridhar Rangayan's film *68 Pages* (2007).

²⁵⁹ Arora, *Love*, 160–161.

²⁶⁰ See *Ibid.*, 174.

and sustaining their intimate romance.²⁶¹ Regarding their interactions and intimacies in his house, Anuj claims that they allow his room to have memories of their love and relationship.²⁶² In fact, it is during one such intimate interactions in the house that Nikhil declares that he does not “want the court in [his] room,” clearly implying, the context of Section 377, that the State has no business interfering in the sexual lives of the citizens, and that he would marry Anuj soon.²⁶³ Nikhil’s frequent visits to Anuj’s house are mentioned as a testimony of the open secret, one that Anuj’s mother guessed about, of their homosexuality and sexual-romantic relationship.²⁶⁴ Similar to the ‘making’ of a ‘home’ space in *You Are Not Alone* – where Sanjay feels safer and ‘at home’ with Ritwik as compared to what his parents’ home had provided for when he was growing up as a confused gay youth²⁶⁵ – and in *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn* – where Saaranish eagerly waits to have meals together with Akshay, like couples do, in their house,²⁶⁶ in *The Other Guy* too, the gay men build a ‘home’ for themselves through a negotiation of identities and relationships for the sake of their love.

Despite living and accepting the reality of their dual lives, Anuj and Nikhil construct an alternative ‘home’ space for themselves in a rented studio apartment away from their own (hetero)normative home spaces that either do not accept their homosexuality (as in Anuj’s case) or are not made aware of the same (as in Nikhil’s case). Though the dream ‘home’ that they manage to co-script and sustain entails a complicated play between what is publicly non-queer and privately queer, the depiction of the safe space of their home attests to their intense love for each other.²⁶⁷ Nikhil regularly travels hundreds of kilometres to be with Anuj in New

²⁶¹ See Mehrotra, *Guy*, 175.

²⁶² See *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁶³ See *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁶⁴ See *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁶⁵ See Arun Mirchandani, *You Are Not Alone* (Mumbai: Leadstart Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2010), 28 & 103.

²⁶⁶ See Sood, *Dreams*, 95.

²⁶⁷ See Mehrotra, *Guy*, 13.

Delhi, and in this process of visiting the city, the ‘home’ space gets collated with that of romance – in other words, the public city, the private flat and the gay romance collate to form a queer idea of ‘home.’ To drive this crucially agential point/idea ‘home’ (pun intended) about the possibility of a sustainable ‘queer’ home, despite the ‘doubleness’ that it might entail, the novel opens with a chapter that describes in details the morning routine of Anuj and Nikhil waking up to each other on their bed in their home and re-confirming their love for each other with their desires, highlighting the erotic and the emotional in the physical and the sexual in their gay romance.²⁶⁸ In a strategically planned structure, the novel’s penultimate chapter provides a peek into the intimacy, romance, conversations, dreams, and positivity in the lives of Anuj and Nikhil in their ‘home’ space when they meet each other again after the day’s work.²⁶⁹

Another key agential utility of the ‘home’ space has been depicted in the marriage affair between Yudi and Milind at the end of *The Boyfriend*. The ultimate queering and subverting of the dominant heteronormative, caste-ist, class-ist, and anti-inter-religion ethics of the contemporary Indian society is achieved in the ‘queer’ marriage of Milind and Yudi, where they tie the knot in the traditional Hindu way. This happens in the private space of Yudi’s bedroom, at Yudi’s home that Milind has symbolically named ‘Mate House’ – not only with its attendant pun on their queer intimacy but also with the assertion of their own private space of ‘gay romance.’ Yudi and Milind’s queer marriage at Mate House includes all the typical elements of a Hindu marriage;²⁷⁰ with no other witness apart from the fire,²⁷¹ they

²⁶⁸ See *Ibid.*, 9–12.

²⁶⁹ See *Ibid.*, 238–246.

²⁷⁰ While the *shehnai* music plays in the background from Yudi’s music system, they write out an invitation card for their wedding; Yudi drapes himself in his mother’s chiffon sari while Milind does his make up using turmeric paste, *bindi*, *kajal*, and nail-polish and then puts *sindoor* in his *maang*; ties the *pallu* of the sari to his own *jabba*; and they finalise their marriage by partaking in the revolution ritual around the sacred fire. See Rao, *Boyfriend*, 107. Vanita comments that the seven steps taken around the fire or the *saptapadi* includes the inextricable element of friendship: “[t]he seventh step, which completes the ritual, is taken for friendship” and “in the accompanying verse, the bridegroom addresses the bride as *sakha* (friend),” reiterating the concept of

repeat the words: “I promise to be your humsafar, trust me, till death do us apart”²⁷² to solemnise their marriage. In this process, they agentially ‘queer’ the possibilities that the private ‘home’ space can provide to a same-sex intimate and romantic relationship. As Brown and Knopp remind us in the context of the politics of ‘queer spaces,’ “even the most ‘private’ and mundane of spaces are sites in which dominant relations of power are reproduced and (potentially) resisted,”²⁷³ and in the case of Mate House, ‘queerly’ subverted and re-imagined. This queer performativity of both Milind and Yudi not only subverts the heteronormative claims on marriage but also resorts to utilisation of the normative hetero-patriarchal system to validate an alternative queer act in/of an alternative queer space.

This alternative agency of the private space of the bedroom is also represented in *Lady Lolita’s Lover* with equal importance. In the context of Jeevan’s sexual relation with Sandesh, it is in the bedroom space that they ‘perform’ their queer sexuality and relationship. The spatial potential of the bedroom in *Lady Lolita’s Lover* informs and helps sustain the gay romance, queer relation, and live-in companionship between Jeevan and Sandesh. The importance of Sea View Apartments as a home space in the lives of both Sandesh and Jeevan becomes clear when, during periods of separation from each other, the former feels “homesick” and longs for returning to Jeevan in what Sandesh calls their “home sweet home.”²⁷⁴ Similar to the marriage ritual in *The Boyfriend*, the ‘home’ that Jeevan and Sandesh have made for each other witnesses a solemnisation ceremony that includes vows made by

‘saptopadam hi mitram’ (seven steps taken together constitute friendship). Vanita, *Rite*, 175. As such, Milind and Yudi’s marriage not only conforms to the tradition but queers it through their marital union.

²⁷¹ In the context of *gandharva* marriage, Vanita reminds that “in some ancient texts, lovers marry each other with no witness except fire” and that it is considered enough to solemnise the union. Vanita, *Rite*, 67.

²⁷² Rao, *Boyfriend*, 107. As a part of the *shringara* for Hindu marital rituals, turmeric paste is applied on the body of to-be married individuals, a *bindi* (coloured dot worn on the centre of the forehead) is put on and *kajal* (Kohl) is applied to the eyes to outline them. The open end (*pallu*) of the woman’s sari is tied to the open end of whatever the man’s wearing. During the marriage ritual, *sindoor* (vermillion) is applied on the *maang* (trichion) of a woman to denote that she is married, and vows in the form of sacred verses are recited to solemnise the marriage.

²⁷³ Brown and Knopp, “Geographies,” 316.

²⁷⁴ See Rao, *Lover*, 247 & 249 respectively.

the former, promising “to stand by [Sandesh] through thick and thin,” the reciprocated kiss of Jeevan’s hand by the latter, and a photograph of themselves clicked by Sandesh,²⁷⁵ effectively referring to the common practice in Hindu marriages where the photograph of the ceremony often acts as a valid proof of matrimony.²⁷⁶

The space of ‘home’ is also portrayed in the form of a sanctuary – a space of recluse wherein same-sex intimacy can be initiated and sustained. For example, in *Seahorse*, the temporary residence of Nicholas on Rajpur Road in New Delhi acts as a private space that provides him and Nehemiah with the possibilities of exploring and sustaining their clandestine relationship. The intimacy in private consolidates the spatial politics of the bungalow as an inhabited, but temporary, closet. On one of his visits to the bungalow, Nehemiah walks up “the porch, dusty and littered with leaves” and comments on “how it crept into [his] hearth, a rush of something like love.”²⁷⁷ The depiction of Nehemiah’s first visit to the bungalow is invested with a feeling of being situated in “in the comfort of the unfamiliar,” and it is the very “utter newness of things” in the house that provides him with “a blank slate, the fantastic lightness of the unknown [...] a relief.”²⁷⁸ His first meeting and interaction with Nicholas was by the side of an aquarium near the sheltered veranda while discussing about seahorses that were inhabited the glass box. In the novel, Nicholas’ bungalow is often referred to by Nehemiah in connection to the aquarium, transforming the space of the home to that of a fantasy-world where, as such, the symbolism of latent desires are both positive and naturalised, by virtue of being the space inhabited by aquatic creatures such as the symbolic seahorses.

²⁷⁵ See *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁷⁶ Also see Vanita, *Rite*, 82, 87 & 178 for her discussion on the validity of the wedding photograph as proof of marriage.

²⁷⁷ Janice Pariat, *Seahorse* (Gurgaon: Random House Publishers India, 2014), 4.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

In effect, the space of the bungalow that facilitates the sexual and emotional interaction and bonding between Nicholas and Nehemiah becomes represented as a sliver of the free natural world invested with a heterotopic symbolism of duality – its cloistered nature of the aquarium-like bungalow makes it both permissive and limited. This analogy of the bungalow’s aquarium-like space includes the symbolism concerning the seahorses – their pre-dawn courting ritual and love bonding becomes a metonymy for the Nicholas-Nehemiah courtship and relationship that the house provides for and sustains.²⁷⁹ Complementing the bungalow’s providing for a close, private, interaction between the two towards building an intimate bonding, Nehemiah’s reflection on the space’s agency in human life and relationships voices the crux of the house’s importance in his and Nicholas’ relationship that is qualified by the house: “It’s fathomable to long for home, the familiar ... but why places you’ve never travelled to? Because somehow we’ve been there before, and they never leave us.”²⁸⁰ Nicholas’ comment to Nehemiah that people “always arrive at the places [they] are drawn to”²⁸¹ sums up the bungalow’s mysterious yet conspicuous role in their relationship.

In their daily strolls in the bungalow’s lawn at dusk, at night and at dawn, Nicholas and Nehemiah form a ritualistic pattern of their relationship where the isolated space provided by the house helps in “writing their history” through “invisible markers” of their bonding, creating “a map of [their] march through time.”²⁸² In their sharing of time, words, and emotions within the walls of the bungalow, “the ground [becomes] all memoranda and signatures,”²⁸³ becoming representative of their indulgence in infinite newfound possibilities of intimacy. In this ‘imminent’ home-ly space of happiness, they explore each other’s psyche and deepest emotions, leading to a bond that is both sexual – portrayed in a poetry bordering

²⁷⁹ See specifically *ibid.*, 181.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

the thresholds of both sensual and sensory pleasures²⁸⁴ and intellectual – over discussions of art, western classical music, English literature, and wine.²⁸⁵

2.2 – Boys’ Hostel

Spaces of temporary residence shared between/among men in an educational, institutionalised context can be, and have been, made to have connotations of non-normative same-sex interaction and intimacy. In the context of literature in India, Pandey Bechan Sharma’s short story “Chocolate” first brought ‘homosexuality’ to the fore but did so in a way that negatively portrayed and constructed the spatial possibilities of homoeroticism and homosociality that exist between and among boys and young men in educational locales.

Ugra’s story locates the ‘corrupting,’ desires, practices and sub-cultures, that the narrative implicitly highlights – commented upon by Katyal as critiquing the practice of *laundebaazi*²⁸⁶ – through the metaphor of the foreign/imported/outsider/anti-national, addictive, and dangerous chocolate,²⁸⁷ and located in the space of the schools and universities following the colonial British pedagogical model and the ‘boarding school’ system that supposedly ended up teaching young boys and men how to be homosexuals.²⁸⁸ However, Madhavi Menon discusses the historical reality of the non-sexual, but intellectually passionate, traditions of same-sex relations (specifically between *gurus* and *shishyas*) exist to reflect upon the wrong assumption that Ugra’s story makes regarding “educational institutions [as] sites of intense desire between men.”²⁸⁹ Menon provides several examples of

²⁸⁴ See *Ibid.*, 112–114, 161.

²⁸⁵ See *Ibid.*, 154–157.

²⁸⁶ See Katyal, *Doubleness*, 80–82.

²⁸⁷ See *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁸⁸ See *Ibid.*, 83–85. Also see Menon, *Desire*, 91.

²⁸⁹ See Menon, *Desire*, 95.

teacher-student duos²⁹⁰ and highlights the ‘Indian’ pedagogic traditions and educational contexts of the relations that have had “a long history of being linked to complete immersion in one another, total surrender”²⁹¹ and that reveal education and educational spaces as intimately linked with same-sex desires.²⁹² This history of same-sex desiring and intimacy in Indian pedagogical traditions and educational spaces has also been re-presented and positively utilised/appropriated – in terms of both homosociality and homoeroticism – in the examples of contemporary ‘gay romance’ fiction that are included in this study.

For example, in *Vivek and I*, the space of the boys’ hostel room plays a crucial role where Kaushik first meets his paramour of the past – Krishna – and where they are able to initiate and sustain both friendship and emotional and sexual intimacies.²⁹³ The space of the hostel room also provides to Krishna the courage to explore his sexuality; Kaushik recalls their intimacy that initiated as homoerotic closeness and concluded in sexual passion: “I was drowsy when I felt his hand slipping inside my pants. [...] He’d brought his face close to mine and said openly, ‘I want to make love to you.’”²⁹⁴ The sexual act itself is described more in terms of the passion rather than the physicality of intercourse, as Kaushik and Vivek do not take part in anally-penetrative sex but in a mock-sexual union in the form of sensual thrusting and kissing. Kaushik even comments that “sex had never been so pleasurable in the past” and informs that this particular intimate interaction “had been the beginning of [their] homosexual relationship.”²⁹⁵

Not limiting themselves to such a form of sexual intimacy, Kaushik and Krishna use the hostel room again for penetrative sexual union later on – described by the former as a

²⁹⁰ Examples such as Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda; Krishna and Arjuna; Miyan Mir and Dara Shikoh; Siddhartha Gautama and Udayin; and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Swami Nityananda, See *Ibid.*, 92–99,

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁹² See *Ibid.*, 99–100.

²⁹³ See Patel, *Vivek*, 84–85.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

most intimate sensuous and sexual passion that leaves them “mentally and physically saturated with love.”²⁹⁶ They use the hostel room to explore each other; in a way, the room allows them the space to bare themselves to each other both sexually – with “exhausting, gratifying session[s] of sex” – and emotionally – with Kaushik, at times, making nude paintings of his beloved Krishna.²⁹⁷ In addition to the room, the toilet of the hostel is also strategically utilised by Krishna and Kaushik for their sexual passions and desires. In one such instance, after being invited for a bath together, as Kaushik rubs soap on Krishna’s back upon the latter’s request, the former witnesses love in Krishna’s eyes – a mutual tension that leads from an expectant stare to a passionate kiss.²⁹⁸ Not limiting to the act of pronouncing their desire for each other through the kiss, they indulge in “ecstatic moments” of their passionate sexual union.²⁹⁹

It is interesting to note how the seemingly ‘normal’ act of helping out a fellow boyfriend in the boys’ hostel’s bathroom sets the stage for the strategic possibilities of realising the mutual desire of becoming ‘boyfriends’ through the intense partaking in mutual sexual passions. In fact, almost summing up the agential use of this particular space, Kaushik informs the reader that “taking a bath together was not uncommon among the hostel boys, so there was nothing to worry about [...]”.³⁰⁰ Furthermore, he talks of “fun and the real thrill” in their keeping their “copulations successfully veiled.”³⁰¹ Similarly, the boys’ hostel, again, provides the space for Kaushik’s gaze to desire for Vivek; at the school’s hostel at Valai, Kaushik often visits Vivek in his room, where despite the presence of other students, he loved to ogle at Vivek’s muscular body, albeit with caution lest the nature of his gaze be noticed

²⁹⁶ See *Ibid*, 107–108.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁹⁸ See *Ibid*.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*.

and interpreted by others.³⁰² In this context, the issue of the teacher-student relationship becomes relevant and gets problematised by the coexisting, but not overriding, plot of desires and love. Countering the literary commentary of Sharma in “Chocolate,” as discussed earlier, the protagonists in *Vivek and I* and the relationship between them cannot be oversimplified and underscored by a negative reading of same-sex desiring and lusting of a male student by a male teacher. Though the relationship does not manifest itself in any form of genital intimacy, the narrative re-constructs the *guru-shishya* paradigm of intimate learning in a domain of a very ‘Indian’ setting in rural space – a theme also explored, in the context of same-sex desires between male students, in Saikat Majumdar’s recently published novel *The Scent of God* (2019) that narrates the story of an adolescent boy and his same-sex love affair and (homo)sexual coming of age, set against the backdrop of an ashram run by a Hindu monastic order.

The Other Guy also provides an overtly descriptive and agential depiction of the private spaces shared by individuals of the same sex in educational institutions. The plot of the novel is predominantly located in the space of the college boys’ hostel which provides for the protagonist Anuj to not only come to terms with his sexuality and sexual desires for men but also partake in a fulfilling same-sex relationship with a fellow student and hosteller. Also, importantly, the hostel provides him with a refuge – a place to escape to – away from the increasingly homophobic and unwelcoming environment in his house; despite being from the New Delhi itself, Anuj opts to reside in the college’s hostel instead.³⁰³ Anuj’s infatuation towards and sexual desiring of his roommate Arya not only implicates the space of the hostel room as one where possibilities for same-sex desires can proliferate but also invests in the hostel with a ‘queer’ potential. Furthermore, this relationship not only allows Anuj to fantasise about the new man in the room and his body in a sexual manner but also enables

³⁰² See *Ibid.*, 120–121.

³⁰³ See Mehrotra, *Guy*, 21.

him to emotionally recuperate from a broken relationship in the past. The same-sex camaraderie between them transforms their relationships into being “more than friends” – an alterative form of intimacy where they become “not soul-mates but soul keepers.”³⁰⁴

It is also in this very hostel’s spaces that Anuj meets Nikhil, falls in love with him the first time he sees him, recalling the popularised idea and trope of ‘love at first sight’ that has been integral to the modern idea of romance, as discussed by Giddens in the context of how it has played a crucial role in shaping the romantic relations in and the ‘romance plot’ of literary romance novels.³⁰⁵ The hostel is also the space that facilitates them to indulge in a series of intimate emotional and sexual interactions that construct their relationship. From “finding excuses to be in his room” to “stare at him lustfully as he undressed” and “‘accidentally’ bumping into him” or stalking him in the corridors³⁰⁶ to indulging in the pleasure borne out of bodily proximity in the homosocial³⁰⁷ space of the tennis court as Nikhil gave him lessons,³⁰⁸ Anuj makes strategic use of the hostel’s various spaces to fulfil his longing and desiring of his love-interest. Similar to the teacher-student relationship and sub-plot in *Vivek and I*, Anuj and Nikhil’s initial interactions and relationship is entailed in a learning-driven intimacy. In fact, their session of tennis practice at the hostel’s tennis court is depicted by Anuj as providing him with the “double fun” of “friendship and tutelage.”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 36.

³⁰⁵ See Giddens, *Intimacy*, 40. Connecting the rise of the idea of romance to the rise of the genre of the novel in late 18th century Europe, Giddens has commented on how “the ‘first glance’ is a communicative gesture, an intuitive grasp of qualities of the other” and “a process of attraction to someone who can make one’s life, as it is said, ‘complete.’” Ibid. ‘Love at first sight,’ according to Giddens, thus, also entails a “capturing of the heart of the other” that is “in fact a process of the creation of a mutual narrative biography.” Ibid., 46.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 38.

³⁰⁷ Sedgwick informs that she uses the term desires rather than love in the context of the ‘homosocial continuum’ in order to highlight the ‘structure’ rather than the ‘emotion.’ See Sedgwick, *Desire*, 2. However, for the interactions and relationship between Anuj and Nikhil, I bring back the emotional in the erotic, claiming that the idea of ‘gay romance’ is almost always already informed by and embedded in the domain of same-sex sexual desiring. Also, though the plot of *The Other Guy* does not involve an ‘erotic triangle’ encompassing the patriarchal use of women in materializing homosexual tensions and relations, as Sedgwick focuses on, the gay men do get involved ‘queer’ liaisons with women.

³⁰⁸ See Mehrotra, *Guy*, 46.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 71.

Notwithstanding the distraction that his intimate proximity to Nikhil resulted in, Anuj finds himself falling harder for Nikhil owing to his excellent tennis playing and teaching skills, who, as Anuj claims, “had turned the sport into art.”³¹⁰

However, their educative interaction also entails a complementary element of eroticism and desiring that makes their companionship of each other holistic; when Anuj visits Nikhil’s room after the tennis session, he finds himself unable to resist the allure of the latter’s body.³¹¹ As Nikhil notices Anuj’s gaze on his body and they share a playful moment of physical proximity, Anuj’s state of mind is focused purely on the desires burning within him.³¹² Even as Anuj captures him “in every detail,” and gets absorbed in “the playful interlude,” the materiality of the hostel room’s space itself gets entwined in his intimate world of desiring imagination for as he “stared at the ceiling fan, it spun in [his] drunken vision.”³¹³ Furthermore, Nikhil’s room in the hostel also serves as a space for several secret rendezvous between the two lovers where they not only indulge in intense sexual desiring, explorations, and intimacies but also discuss and ruminate over the serious questions of love and apprehensions regarding their ‘gay romantic’ relationship, the problems, and the unsure future.³¹⁴ It also serves as a space for saddened farewells when Nikhil is to leave the country for an internship and they meet for saying their goodbyes “in the anguish of separation” with their “tears mingling like the water of two holy rivers, carrying [their] love, loss and despair.”³¹⁵ Furthermore, as they intimately engage – physically and emotionally intertwine – in sensual and erotic sexual intercourse in Nikhil’s room, the symbolism invested in the

³¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, 71–73.

³¹¹ See *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹² See *Ibid.*, 75.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 104–107, 130–132.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 183. In the obvious reference to the rivers Ganga and Yamuna and their place of meeting at the ‘Triveni Sangam’ at Prayag (Allahabad), Anuj’s narration of their intimate mingling takes on a ‘queering’ tone of religious connotations in the context of Hinduism.

“fullness of in the act” and the beauty of sex ³¹⁶ vis-à-vis the devotional and the spiritual in the river and ‘Triveni Sangam’ metaphor becomes the more agential in the narrative politics in the context of space and spatial marking/location – at once queerly subversive and positively agential.

The strategically personal-ised public and natural spaces in and around the hostel also play a crucial role in the interactions, intimacies, and relationship between Anuj and Nikhil. From the soft breeze that “carried the fresh smell of rain [with] its own poetry”³¹⁷ when their bodies pressed against each other at the tennis practice sessions to the shadowy trees lit by the yellow light as they took strolls and “long intimate walks”³¹⁸ after coffee dates at night under a dark sky that had “something differently romantic and haunting about it,”³¹⁹ spaces within the hostel complex are made to stand as witnesses to their gradual discovery of love for each other. Also similar to Kaushik and Krishna in *Vivek and I*, Anuj and Nikhil make strategic use of the bathrooms in the boys’ hostel for their erotic and sexual escapades laced with a ‘romantic poetry’ depicting their kissing of each other in its (homo)erotic crudeness.³²⁰ In fact, Nikhil blurts out the queer logic behind the strategic use of the space: “Two boys can go into a bathroom together, right? A boy and a girl cannot.”³²¹ It is also during the erotic intimacy in the hostel’s bathroom that Anuj comes to realise how their “heartbeats raced and souls burned with desire” for each other as their gazing eyes and wet lips were “smeared with the colours of love and liberation.”³²² It is not only spaces such as the bathrooms that are made use of by the two but they also venture into riskier territories bordering on sexual

³¹⁶ Ibid., 184.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 47.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 109.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 60–61.

³²⁰ See Ibid., 95.

³²¹ Ibid., 94.

³²² Ibid., 96.

adventurism. One such example is the empty college bus and the dark alley near the Faculty area that have been discussed in the third chapter.

Similarly, in *Hostel Room 131*, the private space of the engineering college boys' hostel room in Pune shared by Sudhir and Farouq serves as a key element in the love affair and sexual liaison between the protagonists Siddharth and Sudhir. While visiting Pune for the first time and staying at a mutual friend Farouq's place, it is in this very hostel room that Siddharth comes across Sudhir, upon meeting whom, the former gets enamoured by the boyish beauty of the latter, "as if his fantasies had suddenly come true."³²³ Even as Sudhir takes in the beauty of Siddharth and rejoices at the unlikely possibility of finding him, he initiates a physical interaction with Sudhir – one that, initially, is laced with homoerotic undertones and later, blatantly sexual acts. Siddharth's "method [is] to slip his hand into the other's while they talked," commenting on how he "was destined to meet [Sudhir]" there.³²⁴

By situating the male-male homo-erotic and homo-sexual plot in a fairly identifiable but generally normativised spatial domain, *Hostel Room 131*, like *The Other Guy*, queers the space of the engineering college and specifically the men's college hostel in order to provide a queer inflection to the popular genre of heterosexual college romance novels as written by the likes of Chetan Bhagat.³²⁵ As they converse, Siddharth partakes in a highly suggestive and intimate play of Sudhir's hands – he kneads them and makes obscene gestures through his fingers' movements.³²⁶ This act of same-sex intimacy played out through a coupling of hands – a form of non-sexual tactile intercourse – lays a claim on the space of the boys' hostel room and its potential for further strategic sexual interaction. In fact, it's not just in the

³²³ Rao, *Hostel*, 32.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

³²⁵ Bhagat's novels such as *Five Point Someone* (2004) and *2 States* (2009) include plots where the college and the college hostel spaces function agentially in constructing the spatiality of heterosexual love-story in contemporary romance novels written in English in India.

³²⁶ See Rao, *Hostel*, 34.

hostel room's space, as discussed earlier, but also in the hostel's premises that Siddharth continues with his hand-holding intimacy with Sudhir – not interpreted in a negative manner relating to homosexuality but as a 'normal' scene of bonding between two male friends. Similar to Kaushik and Krishna in *Vivek and I* and Anuj and Nikhil in *The Other Guy*, Siddharth and Sudhir make strategic use of familiar but personal-ised spaces of the boys' hostel.

The alterative space of the hostel room also functions as a symbolic transformation into the lovers' abode as it is also in this very room that Siddharth thinks of using for his and Sudhir's sexual consummation. Siddharth's plans for the night that they meet for the first time reflects on a queering of the post-marital sexual domain; he terms it as their prospective "honeymoon night."³²⁷ Later, the actual sexual act between Siddharth and Sudhir in the latter's hostel room the same night is depicted through stark visual details.³²⁸ However, Siddharth and Sudhir are not the only ones that strategically benefit from the spatial politics of the room in the boys' hostel; the hostel also provides space and possibilities for other gay characters such as Gaurav and Vivek who organise and invite Siddharth and Sudhir to a gay party in their room where "guys danced in pairs" and "smooched as they danced."³²⁹

The agency of the boys' hostel room pertaining to same-sex interactions and intimacies in such a manner is considered pervasive by elements of the State as evident in the police raid on Gaurav and Vivek's room and their arrest on charges of possessing "dirty sexy magazine"³³⁰ – an euphemism for queer literature. Even as Gaurav and Vivek reflect that the arrest shows "that the world is taking notice of [their] revolution,"³³¹ they are eventually expelled from their hostel room by a college authority wary of same-sex sexual possibilities

³²⁷ Ibid, 38.

³²⁸ See Ibid., 41.

³²⁹ Ibid., 80.

³³⁰ Ibid., 117.

³³¹ Ibid.

in the hostel's space. In this context, the politics surrounding the space of the boys' hostel room is problematised by the tussle between the claim to its strategic use by men who occupy it and the institutional intrusion towards foiling such agential access of the same. The seriousness around the issue of the agential access of the hostel's space for same-sex relations becomes evident in the novel when local newspapers publish negative and homophobic articles about the events, indiscreetly labelling Gaurav and Vivek as "gay lovers" who "had gay orgies in their hostel room and imported gay porn from America," calling the boys, like Ugra's accusation, "a blot on society" and homosexuality as "against Indian culture," and lauding "the college authorities and the police for busting the racket."³³²

Nevertheless, the role and agency of the spatial politics of the boys' hostel is epitomised by the symbolic marriage ceremony. Similar to the marriage ritual performed by Yudi and Kishore in *The Boyfriend*, Siddharth and Sudhir also take part in a ritualistic marital agreement, but with a difference of manner. Gaurav and Vivek enable their hostel room to provide the private (and clandestine) space for Siddharth and Sudhir to reconcile in the form of a ceremony that involves them being separated by a sari used as a makeshift partition while they express and confirm their dedication to their future plans as a couple. The ritual with the sari-as-partition actually seems to be constructed in a manner closely similar to that of the Islamic *nikaah*³³³ ceremony. Gaurav, in the manner of an officiant, asks Sudhir three times if he wants to accept Siddharth as his man, to which Sudhir only replies at the end, not with a consensual yes but with a demand; the condition of the marriage-like agreement is that he

³³² Ibid., 123.

³³³ The *nikaah* ceremony is the traditional marriage contract ritual in Islam; the components include the meher – "a formal statement specifying the monetary amount the groom will give the bride." The marriage contract is then signed "in which the groom or his representative proposes to the bride in front of at least two witnesses, stating the details of the meher." Then, "the bride and groom demonstrate their free will by repeating the word *qabul* ("I accept," in Arabic) three times" and "the couple and two male witnesses sign the contract, making the marriage legal according to civil and religious law." See Robin Beth Schaer, "Muslim Wedding Ceremony Rituals," *The Knot*, <https://www.theknot.com/content/muslim-wedding-ceremony-rituals>.

will become a woman.³³⁴ Furthermore, the space of the hostel room also provides the cathartic soliloquy of Sudhir in which he, for the first time, complains about and challenges patriarchy's domination over and oppression of his voice, desires, and will. In a theatrical manner, the rest of the men "fade into the background and the spotlight in on him," and Sudhir rants about how he has been made subject to compulsion and being taken for granted by various men, including his father and Siddharth, with respect to key decisions in life such as selecting engineering over arts, getting into a sexual relationship with a man in an abrupt manner, and being manipulated and blackmailed by homophobic hostel-mates.³³⁵ It is also this very space that enables him to confess about his longing of being a girl in his childhood, in the form of wearing his mother's saris, and declare his earnest decision to finally be his "natural self" and change into a woman in his adulthood – to finally do as he pleases.³³⁶

³³⁴ See Rao, *Hostel*, 200. Functioning in the manner of the *meher* in a traditional Islamic *nikaah* ceremony, Sudhir's demand of being gifted the monetary and emotional support of changing his sex through a sex reassignment surgery stands as a the crucial component towards his possible marriage to Siddharth – with the logic: "Two men cannot get married, but a man and a woman can." Ibid.

³³⁵ See Ibid., 203–204.

³³⁶ See Ibid., 204.

Chapter Three

RETURN TO NATURE, LOVE: THE QUEER POTENTIAL OF RURAL SPACES AND TRAVELS

Given that the common understanding or general perception of the ‘queer space’ is an urban one in contemporary literary and cultural studies, it doesn’t come as a surprise, that “rural queer experiences are often made invisible, are problematized, and when they are seen, it is as a deviation from the norm.”³³⁷ However, drawing inspiration from ecofeminism, critical investments in the field of what has come to be termed as queer ecocriticism or queer ecological studies, starting from Greta Gaard and Mark Lawrence, through David Bell, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Gordon Brent Ingram, Nicole Seymour, etc., and recently Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta to name a few, have provided a plethora of connections between queer and ecocritical theories and studies, including the domains of the ‘natural’ and the ‘rural.’

In Western discourses of sexuality, the naturalisation of (hetero-)sexuality and sexual evolution (and its politics), via Charles Darwin,³³⁸ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis, has been understood, in Foucauldian terms, as a biologised view of sexual ‘nature’ that must correlate to a ‘natural’ given-ness of human sexual interactions.³³⁹ However, discussing the anti-nature and anti-erotic ideologies of hetero-patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality

³³⁷ Lesley Marple, “Rural Queers?: The Loss of the Rural in Queer,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 24, no. 2-3 (2005): 71.

³³⁸ However, Timothy Morton – one of the proponents ‘queer ecology’ – makes the claim that Darwin’s theorization of evolution is actually antiteleological and antiessentialist in the context of non-heteronormative sexualities. See Timothy Morton, “Guest Column: Queer Ecology,” *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 278.

³³⁹ For a discussion on a history of sexuality and ecology vis-à-vis the discourse of the ‘natural’ and the ‘queer,’ see Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction,” 7–11.

in ‘Western’ contexts,³⁴⁰ in a queer ecofeminist perspective, Gaard points out the ironic dualism that has existed within the heteronormative discourse that both otherises homosexuality and ‘queer’-ness as ‘unnatural’ or ‘against nature’ and the ‘natural’ as inferior to the patriarchal-cultural.³⁴¹ She also provides several examples to show how both the colonial project and the imperialist expansion have vehemently devalued, violently oppressed, and strategically otherised women, queer sexualities, and the ‘natural’ simultaneously in a vicious model of domination politics propagated by both the Church and the State, constructing the hegemony of the pro-cultural/anti-nature heteronormative.³⁴² As such, she avers that “liberating the erotic requires reconceptualizing humans as equal participants in culture and in nature, in able to explore the eroticism of reason and the unique rationality of the erotic.”³⁴³

In a similar understanding, Mark Lawrence notes that “rural spaces and places can serve as subversive ‘spaces of representation’ or sites of ‘liminal’ experiences.”³⁴⁴ Calling for a discursive critical rural studies, he claims that “even if rural places, people, and cultures are considered ‘marginalized,’ [...] a strategic ambivalence permits support of the possibility that such cultures are of ‘hybrid’ form,” that “cultural forms are adopted, transformed, returned,” and that “cultural identity is itself constantly renegotiated through such dynamics.”³⁴⁵ The ‘erotic’ in the ‘rural,’ per Lawrence, can be multiply invested with a “metalanguage of nature,” giving rise to a “constellation of made, unmade and remade constructions” of the ‘erotic rural.’³⁴⁶

³⁴⁰ See Greta Gaard, “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism,” *Hypatia* 12, no. 1 (1997): 118.

³⁴¹ See *Ibid.*, 119–120.

³⁴² See *Ibid.*, 122–131.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁴⁴ Mark Lawrence, “Heartlands or Neglected Geographies?: Liminality, Power, and the Hyperreal Rural,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 13, no. 1 (1997): 1.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

Drawing, but distinct, from the ecofeminist approach, ‘queer ecology’ has emerged as a promising paradigm in poststructuralist queer ecocriticism towards a discursive re-thinking of how non-heteronormative sexualities and the environment interrelate and intersect; Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Timothy Morton, and Nicole Seymour are some proponents of ‘queer ecology’ as an epistemological and ontological discourse. Morton comments upon the bringing together of ecology and queer theory – both non-essentialist in nature – through a discussion of their claims on and examples of the non-authenticity of a fixed and universal ‘given’ and a reality of diverse differences and interdependences, in order to arrive at an understanding of what ‘queer ecology’ can entail.³⁴⁷

On a different, but relatable, plane of thought, Mortimer-Sandilands states that the aim of the discourse of ‘queer ecology’ is “a rethinking of heterosexism and homophobia in environmental discourse”³⁴⁸ that problematises the idea of ‘nature’ and the ‘natural’ as “an ecological realm of inescapable, constitutive interconnectedness,”³⁴⁹ and that “desires for a different kind of sensuous experience of place.”³⁵⁰ Thus, ‘queer ecological’ investments entail critical analyses of ‘locations’ and ‘co-productions’ posited in an understanding that “ideas and practices of nature, including both bodies and landscapes, are located in particular productions of sexuality, and sex is [...] located in particular formations of nature.”³⁵¹ According to her, ‘queer ecology’ can help the LGBTQ+ community “challenge the destructive pairing of heterosexuality and nature by developing ‘reverse discourses’ oriented to challenging dominant understandings of our ‘unnatural passions.’”³⁵²

³⁴⁷ See Morton, “Queer Ecology,” 275–278.

³⁴⁸ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “Whose There is There There? Queer Directions and Ecocritical Orientations,” *Ecozona* 1, no. 1 (2010): 63.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁵¹ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction,” 4–5.

³⁵² Mortimer-Sandilands, “Unnatural Passions?,” 7.

Nicole Seymour attempts at ‘locating’ ‘queer ecology’ within a discourse of “not just a reconceptualization of the human relationship to the non-human natural world, but a reassessment of how we draw critical-theoretical boundaries.”³⁵³ In conceptualising the ambivalent idea and construct of ‘nature,’ she reminds the strange relation queer theory has had with the concept of ‘nature’ and the ‘natural’ and forewarns that both the undertheorisation and the overtheorisation of ‘nature’ and the antipathy between the ‘queer’ and the ‘natural’ are problematic and must be avoided when bridging the gaps between queer theory and ecocriticism.³⁵⁴ As such, her theorisation of plural ‘queer ecologies,’ and its elaboration through the texts included in her book, concerns an understanding that “queerness might be progressively articulated through the ‘natural’ more broadly, or the non-human world more specifically”³⁵⁵ and can potentially “combat the kinds of naturalizations and denaturalizations that enable exploitation and discrimination, or that deny the complexities of humans and non-humans.”³⁵⁶

In the ‘Western’ contexts, Mortimer-Sandilands claims that the idea of homosexuality as ‘unnatural,’ and ‘artificial,’ emerged from the ideology that urban spaces breed same-sex intimacies and sexual relations contrary to, and specifically because of the disconnect with, the ‘natural’ realm of heterosexual virility and heteronormative reproductive sexuality,³⁵⁷ which has historically resulted in a discursive and hegemonic ‘heterosexualisation of nature spaces.’³⁵⁸ Subsequently, the pervasive assumption in the linking of homosexuality with cities and urban spaces has led to an erasure of the presence of rural LGBTQ+ lives,³⁵⁹ has contributed to the migration away from rural and suburban communities, and has added fuel

³⁵³ Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 3.

³⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, 3–4.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12–14.

³⁵⁸ See Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction,” 3–4 & 13.

³⁵⁹ See *Ibid.*, 16.

“to the ghettoization of queer culture as inherently and only urban, and to the wide spread assumption that country spaces are inherently hostile to anything other than monogamous heterosexuality.”³⁶⁰ As such, as Lawrence Knopp points out, connections between particular sexualities and spaces in small-town and rural environments have received less attention in studies related to queer geographies and queer spaces.³⁶¹ However, Brown and Knopp point out that in the past few years, a body of work has begun to appear that focuses on non-metropolitan and rural queer sexualities.³⁶²

‘Queer ruralism,’ as Gordon Brent Ingram terms it, entails “the desire to demarcate and transform ‘new’ space” – “the margins, the anti-ghetto where small networks have functioned in a careful but often provisional combination of isolation and cohesion.”³⁶³ In the context of literary ventures, Mortimer-Sandilands states that “many queer writers have pointed to the fact that there is a long tradition [...] of a positive and conscious linkage between same-sex eroticism and rural or wilderness environments.”³⁶⁴ She notes that contemporary gay literature has emphasised that “natural settings have been important sites for the exploration of male homosexuality as a natural practice” where “rural spaces in particular have served [...] as places of freedom for male homoerotic encounters,” putting forward through the “pastoral literary conventions” an argument for “the authenticity of homosexuality” and challenging “the very idea of the naturalness of heterosexuality.”³⁶⁵ Similarly, David Shuttleton discusses how the idea of the ‘gay pastoral’ has been talked about and commented upon by historians and literary critics like Rictor Norton and Byrne S. Fone,

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁶¹ See Knopp, “Space,” 137.

³⁶² See Brown and Knopp, “Geographies,” 317.

³⁶³ Gordon Brent Ingram, “Queers in Space: Towards a Theory of Landscape and Sexual Orientation,” paper presented at the *Queers in Space I* Panel of the Queer Sites Conference, University of Toronto, May, 1993, 7.

³⁶⁴ Mortimer-Sandilands, “Unnatural Passions?,” 20.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

albeit in a rather essentialist and universalising manner;³⁶⁶ Shuttleton calls for ‘narrative and historio-cultural specificity’ in understanding the ‘gay pastoral’ non-monologically to interrogate how “pastoral conventions have been invoked” for both a “rejection of a minoritizing homosexual or gay identity” and as “coded endorsements or overt celebrations of same-sex desire,”³⁶⁷ that he undertakes through critical insights into texts such as E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* (1914 [1971]) and Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948).

In the Indian contexts, concepts and discourses of queer ecocriticism, queer ecology and queer ruralism have only recently been considered by literary and cultural theorists and commentators. For example, Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta have recently provided a critical entry point into considering doing queer ecocriticism in India. While drawing from ‘West’-centric ideas and understandings of what queer ecocriticism has considered and can explore, their chapter on the ‘rural queer’ provides examples and contexts of recent academic and ethnographic outputs surrounding issues specific to the Indian sub-continent, such as Rohit K. Dasgupta’s work on the *launda* dancers³⁶⁸ in sub-urban and non-metropolitan locales and forms of rural kinships and non-normative rural sexualities;³⁶⁹ Aniruddha Dutta’s work on subjectivities like MSM (Men who have Sex with Men), transgender activism, and

³⁶⁶ David Shuttleton, “The Queer Politics of Gay Pastoral,” in *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (London: Routledge, 2000), 124–125.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁶⁸ See Rohit K. Dasgupta, “Launda Dancers: The Dancing Boys of India,” *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2013): 442–448. Dasgupta’s work on the *launda* dancers of West Bengal prefaces Bakshi and Dasgupta’s re-consideration of the socio-sexual processes through which non-heteronormative forms of performance and subjectivities can be understood vis-à-vis the problematic opportunities and ‘queer’ agency offered by rural spaces and travels. Akhil Katyal has also, recently, focused on *laundebaazi* (as an ‘idiom of same-sex desire’ and socio-political metaphor in India where men develop and sustain a ‘habit’ for boys in an erotic-sexual context) to elaborate upon the complex and multifarious language, politics, and modernity of specific homosexual and homoerotic sub-cultures that have flourished in North India and that have been represented, discussed, and critiqued in the literature (such as Pandey Bechan Sharma ‘Ugra’s “Chocolate”) and that can be witnessed, discerned, and understood through the contemporaneity of actual cultural practices. See chapter 2 of Katyal, *Doubleness*.

³⁶⁹ See Bakshi and Dasgupta, *Queer Studies*, 77–78.

state intervention;³⁷⁰ Maya Sharma and Ila Nagar's works on varied and non-normative politics of subjectivities;³⁷¹ and Paul Boyce and Rohit K. Dasgupta's work on the 'symbiosis of intimate and everyday lives' located within the modernities of same-sex desiring experiences in and migration to and from small towns that make them possible.³⁷² However, no critical attempt has been made to consider, analyse, and rethink queer ecocriticism vis-à-vis the contemporary literary fictive perspectives, though the relation between nature spaces and erotic love abound in existing literature.

Within the specific discourse on romance and its narratives, Bond, in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Classical Indian Love Stories and Lyrics*, mentions the traditional relevance and importance of the 'natural.' In referring to the heritage of romance literature in India's 'Classical Age,' he states that the spaces outside the city – areas of "considerable verdure [...] fringing the great forests" – served as "a fit setting for the great legends and romances of gods and heroes and heroines."³⁷³ He provides the example of *Shakuntala* in which, he claims, Kalidasa "is at his best in the lyrical passages describing the flora and fauna of the land."³⁷⁴ Additionally, the location and agency of the erotic in the traditions of Indian romance movement, Narayan claims, "is characterized by nature as evocative of human sensuality [...] and is writ large with potential for humans in an erotic frame of mind."³⁷⁵ She

³⁷⁰ See Aniruddha Dutta, "Legible Identities and Legitimate Citizens," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15, no. 4 (2013): 494–514. Dutta's work on the transgender individuals and MSM in urban and semi-urban areas of West Bengal considers and critiques the presumptive and hegemonic articulations of how these identities have been constructed and understood. In this context, in mapping a cartography of transgender-MSM, the location in the semi-urban and non-metropolitan spaces is revealed as informed by and constitutive of a diversely complex discourse of regional terminologies and nomenclatures (in the specific context of HIV-AIDS activism). See *Ibid.*, 501–504.

³⁷¹ See Bakshi and Dasgupta, *Queer Studies*, 84–85.

³⁷² See Boyce and Dasgupta, "Queer Modernities," 209–225. Boyce and Dasgupta provide and discuss the lives of their "small-town interlocutors" in West Bengal and how the migratory (between the metropolis and the small town) narratives complicate "same-sex experiences within local and regional histories." *Ibid.*, 212, 215–219. They further claim that "within prevailing narratives, peri-urban/rural queer life-worlds may be represented as hard to reconcile with utopian queer imaginaries, in India." *Ibid.*, 222.

³⁷³ Bond, *Stories*, xi.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xi–xii.

³⁷⁵ Narayan, *Desire*, 6.

provides the example of Tamil Sangam poems where, through “the extensive and at times codified use of nature metaphors,” “desire is enhanced and celebrated as a shared geography of (wo)man and nature, a microcosmos to a macrocosmos.”³⁷⁶ However, she also ruminates how, in the context of “the current Indian urban landscape that rushes away from rather than bends towards nature,”³⁷⁷ one might understand and interrogate the role of nature and natural elements in narratives of romance and erotic love that have traditionally been intertwined.

Contemporary ‘gay romance’ fiction written in English in India seems to have taken up the responsibility and project to re-instate and re-infuse the importance of nature in love and romance. As such, there can be witnessed a trend of moving away from the chaotic urban in what can be called a ‘queer’ ‘return to nature’ that taps in and celebrates same-sex love and romance in the potential of rural spaces and travels. I am not making an argument that gay men (and LGBTQ+ individuals) have a special, experiential relationship to nature or to environmental issues by virtue of their identities or experiences, but am attempting at unearthing the intimate relationships between nature and rural spaces, and travels to and within such spaces – for possibilities, pilgrimage, and relocation, and same-sex erotic and romantic love and romance, as portrayed in the texts, towards an understanding of a much neglected aspect of the connect between space and gay romance.

3.1 – Travelling for Queer Possibilities

The idea of reclaiming a ‘natural’ landscape for and by the queer subject and gay couple is a trope quite complexly, but artistically, portrayed in non-literary media of narratives – say in cinematic texts such as Ang Lee’s now-iconic film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), adapted from Annie Proulx’s short story of the same name, that has memorialised the

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 7.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

romance story of Jack and Ennis – two ‘macho’ shepherds who find themselves in a sexual and emotional relationship with each other catalysed by/in the Wyoming mountains in the American West.³⁷⁸ In the Indian context, Sudhanshu Saria’s film *Loev* (2015) portrays a similarly complex sexual and emotional relationship between two men – Sahil and Jai – who discover passion and love for each other in a weekend hiking trip to the Western Ghats in Maharashtra. The moving away from non-urban spaces and strategic exploration and utility of ‘natural’ spaces for the purpose of same-sex intimacy and romance also features as a major trope in contemporary gay romance fiction in India.

For example, in *You Are Not Alone*, Sanjay’s first meeting with his paramour Ritwik takes place in the form of a surprise trekking trip to the lap of nature two hours away from Mumbai’s urbanity. Though initially sceptical of the isolated space that Ritwik has driven him to for their first date, Sanjay gradually comes to relish the beauty of the natural space and the possibility of discrete privacy that it has provided them with. In a symbolic trek that Sanjay and Ritwik undertake to reach the pinnacle of the hills that they had arrived at, the setting and the climb can be interpreted as representing the struggle that they have to be ready to face as a gay couple. It also provides them with what victory will look like once they successfully complete the trek and reach their destination at the top of the hill, as reflected upon by Sanjay:

I looked around and was flabbergasted by what I saw. At a distance I saw a river, it was so quiet that we could literally hear the ripples of the calm water flowing. [...] Little birds continued to chirp as the sun shone on us warmly. I looked towards the blue sky to see the clouds forming different shapes. [...] Today I saw signs of freedom, happiness, confidence in the sky.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁸ For a critical take on *Brokeback Mountain* from a queer ecological perspective, see Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction,” 1–6. Also see Richard Phillips and Diane Watt, “Introduction,” in *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (London: Routledge, 2000), 3–4; and chapter 4 of Seymour, *Strange Natures*.

³⁷⁹ Mirchandani, *Alone*, 99.

It is also in this natural spatial setting that Sanjay and Ritwik share their first intimate act – a kiss that represents not only their newfound love for each other but also their claiming of the freedom to love, witnessed by nature and its various elements. Furthermore, the natural, open space features Sanjay’s recollection of their sexual intimacy when, one night, instead of going back home, they drive to a secluded place away from the bustling city and “didn’t just have sex,” but “made love in the open, under the stars” and “spent the night with [their] naked bodies closely held tight looking into each other’s eyes and smiling.”³⁸⁰ Such a wresting of spatial agency for the purpose of same-sex sexual intimacy is both symbolic – a portrayal of positive and possible love-making and political – a claim to space that is both ‘natural’ and permissive for gay romance portrayed through the agency of eroticism and, (as mentioned earlier) in Mortimer-Sandilands terms, a sensuous perception and experience of the ‘natural’ space. It also refers to what David Bell argues about the ‘erotic rural’ wherein the “rural occupies particular, but very complex, location in the wider sociospatial economy of desire.”³⁸¹

Another crucial agential re-presentation of the natural space vis-à-vis queer possibilities and gay romance is the marriage that Sanjay and Ritwik successfully perform. Given that ‘gay marriage’ is illegal in India, much like Nikhil’s marriage proposition to Anuj in *The Other Guy*,³⁸² Ritwik proposes getting married in Nepal and they do so with all the customary planning and traditions that pertain to a cross-sex marriage. Interestingly, the venue for their ‘gay marriage’ is “in the middle of the forest in Chitwan.”³⁸³ The importance

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 102.

³⁸¹ David Bell, “Eroticizing the Rural,” in *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (London: Routledge, 2000), 82.

³⁸² See Mehrotra, *Guy*, 220.

³⁸³ Mirchandani, *Alone*, 123. The novel seems to state that same-sex marriage is legal in Nepal which is not true. Though the Supreme Court of Nepal ruled in 2007 that the country should explore the legalisation of same-sex marriage, it has still not become the law. See Yam Kumari Kandel, “Same-Sex Marriage Still Illegal In Nepal, Despite 2007 Supreme Court Ruling,” *Global Press Journal*, Dec 18, 2016. The novel seems to be informed by one such transgender marriage that took place in 2017 that, nevertheless, was not recognised by the State. See Agence France-Presse, “Nepali Couple Registers the Country’s First Transgender Marriage,” *PRI*,

vested in the natural setting of the same-sex marriage is presented in the spatial description provided by Sanjay to his delight: “The quadrangle was surrounded by trees, plants and bushes on all sides. We could hear constant chirping of birds.”³⁸⁴ To add to this marriage performed in the lap of nature, the element of subtle sensationalism is added: “To our right at a distance was an exotic waterfall that flowed into an adjacent river. Herds of deer were frequently seen sipping water from the river.”³⁸⁵

Similarly, in *Hostel Room 131*, when Siddharth visits the scenic ‘natural’ places near Belgaum – “the outskirts surrounded by hills and brooks” with “the resplendent Gokak waterfalls” nearby, he dreams of having his honeymoon with Sudhir in such spaces of nature-dominated isolation and beauty.³⁸⁶ In fact, Siddharth’s visit to Belgaum and his visits to various local destinations in the rural areas with Sudhir is named as ‘honeymoon’ in the narrative.³⁸⁷ However, a different perspective on the possibilities provided by the natural spaces is presented in the novel where the focus is on the relative conflict in permissibility of same-sex relations for varied groups. A curious differentiation between queer individuals and the possibility of partaking in society’s normative rituals is highlighted through the natural phenomenon of the ‘diamond ring’ phase of a solar eclipse. When Siddharth and Sudhir go for a family trip to witness a total solar eclipse at a sea-side village called Karwar and witness the ‘diamond ring’ phase, Siddharth whispers into Sudhir’s ears, “My love, this is the kind of cosmic ring I’ll give you for our wedding.”³⁸⁸ The ironic impossibility of such a promise in the Indian legal context is both starkly contrasted with and challenged by the ritualistic

Aug 5, 2017. Nevertheless, the mention of Nepal in two of the novels for the purpose of same-sex marriage reflects upon the possibilities that travelling, and queer tourism, can provide to Indian men who wish to marry their male lovers.

³⁸⁴ Mirchandani, *Alone*, 123.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ Rao, *Hostel*, 88.

³⁸⁷ See *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

marriage solemnised between two other ‘queer’ characters in the novel – the *hijra* Anarkali and the *kothi* Raj Kumar – on the same day and in the same space:

At the height of the total solar eclipse, precisely when the sky was enveloped by darkness and the Diamond Ring appeared, the offbeat couple garlanded each other before a portrait of the goddess Yellamma, and Raj Kumar put his own version of a diamond ring (made of cheap imitation jewels) on Anarkali’s finger.³⁸⁹

The couple further queer the institution of marriage by taking part in other rituals of a traditional Hindu marriage by circling round the makeshift fire, while coconuts are broken and mantras recited by *hijras* who were a part of Anarkali’s clan.³⁹⁰

In *Seahorse*, travelling into the lap of nature in the form of road trips provides the characters with much freedom of exploring themselves and their relationships. Especially in the context of Nehemiah’s past love interest Lenny, their motorcycle rides to far-off places away from the town provides insights into the unpronounced language of Nehemiah’s desiring of Lenny.³⁹¹ It is also the natural space that provides for the reunion of Nehemiah and Nicholas at the end of the novel; by the seashore in England, Nehemiah meets with Nicholas after a long gap when both of them have made journeys (both literal and figurative) into their own hearts and have discovered their deepest, true desires for each other, finally arriving by the sea at the twilight of infinite possibilities – the natural setting where they metaphorically turn into seahorses performing the pre-dawn dance of courtship, love and coupledness.³⁹²

A considerable portion of *Vivek and I* is ridden with the in-depth descriptions of the natural surroundings in the rural spaces – the hills, forests, and valleys of and around Valai that serve as the stage where Kaushik’s infatuation, desire, and love for Vivek is constructed,

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 109.

³⁹⁰ Ibid. For a discussion on the significance of the exchange of garlands and the ring in the Indian context of marriage as key signifiers, see Vanita, *Rite*, 176–178.

³⁹¹ See Pariat, *Seahorse*, 17.

³⁹² See Ibid., 289–290.

dramatised, and (almost) concluded. Ruskin Bond, in the context of the importance of nature in the traditions of romance writing in India, reminds that “the great achievement of [Kalidasa’s] *Shakuntala* is in part due to its creator’s love of nature” for he “is at his best in the lyrical passages describing the flora and fauna of the land.”³⁹³ Without insinuating that Patel’s novel resembles Kalidasa’s literary style and/or artistry, the tradition of narrativising romance in nature seems to have been dedicatedly carried forward in *Vivek and I*. It is as if the gay romance of Kaushik and Vivek exists as long and as far as the character of Valai – in its isolated rural-ness and natural richness – stretches its spatial and figurative boundaries. From them sitting under a neem tree and visiting the sunset point at twilight to experiencing new things in life like Kaushik holding a snake (an innuendo?) for the first time, the spaces in nature provide them with ample opportunities to bond with each other. In fact, the narrative colludes the erotic of the natural spaces with/in the sexual passion of Kaushik for Vivek where the ‘erotic’ in/of the ‘rustic’ not only sustains the former’s love, affection, and desires for the latter but also showcases, as David Bell has argued for (and as mentioned earlier), an ‘erotic rural.’

The various spaces in nature in the novel further exemplify this idea of the erotic rural in multiple ways. For example, the sunset point, despite being a prohibited area, is depicted as the place from where, in the company of Vivek, Kaushik “had enjoyed the rare magnificence of sunset for the first time in [his] life;”³⁹⁴ the experience can be interpreted to stand as a symbolic representation of the joy and pleasure of same-sex companionship and intimacy in solitude despite the restrictions that societal laws (both legal and cultural) thrust upon such experiences. The sunset point provides desired privacy to the two where Kaushik, during one of their visits, discusses issues of homosexuality and same-sex intimacy, history, and relationships with Vivek in order to gauge the latter’s views and in the hope of

³⁹³ Bond, *Stories*, xi–xii.

³⁹⁴ Patel, *Vivek*, 51.

discovering his sexual leanings.³⁹⁵ The regular visits to the sunset point also provide Kaushik with opportunities to know Vivek better; in one such visit, Vivek manages to cheer up a saddened Kaushik through his mimicry of what Kaushik had said in the past about the place, infused with the presence of the natural elements of optimism at sunset.³⁹⁶ It is during this brief moment of looking into each other's eyes in hope and joy that Kaushik reflects upon "how beautifully the ever smiling face [of Vivek] glittered golden in the last rays of the sun!,"³⁹⁷ essentially revealing passion and love for the boy intertwined in and testified by the reality of nature.

Kaushik recalls similar experiences with Krishna in one of their favourite haunts – the ruins of an old fort near Baroda – where they used to "sit on the filthy, old stone walls for hours and wait for the sun to set, or just wander aimlessly in the fields hand in hand" in silent, but expressive, company and intimacy, as if reclaiming spaces of both the past and the present.³⁹⁸ Not limiting themselves to such forms of intimacy, Kaushik also recalls how, in the past, he and Krishna had, during one of their road trips, "under the cluster of [an] eucalyptus tree [...] made love in a rhythm that was timeless and ecstatic" and how "it was like being in some miraculous world."³⁹⁹ Kaushik's reflecting upon the daring that they had shown in having "sex under the open sky"⁴⁰⁰ entails a key realisation of the agency of natural, open spaces that allows for a celebration of same-sex intimacy and passions.

The forests, rivers, and trails of Valai and the nearby locales also provide to Kaushik opportunities of intimate and desirous gazing upon Vivek's body; he recalls of a visit to the falls of Mozira, somewhere on the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra and "how sensational it

³⁹⁵ See *Ibid.*, 55–57.

³⁹⁶ See *Ibid.*, 211–212.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

[had been] to be bare with Vivek!”⁴⁰¹ While Kaushik and Vivek made occasional trips to “the remotest ends of the district” on a borrowed bike, the narrative expresses Kaushik’s desire to “drive Vivek away from the rest of the world” and “elope far, far away with him if he was ready.”⁴⁰² In this fervour, Kaushik often partakes in explorative wanderings and experimentations with Vivek in natural spaces; these explorations often include a non-sexual ‘queering’ of sleeping together. From sleeping under the night sky on the cold sands by the river Ambika to sharing the same *khat* and sleeping under a single quilt watching the twinkling stars in the sky in the backyard of Vivek’s house in his village,⁴⁰³ the sharing of an intimate space in nature is translated by Kaushik and Vivek’s non-sexual ‘sleeping’ reflects an alterative form of consuming same-sex desiring. Other ‘queer’ forms of fulfilling his desires for Vivek in the open, natural space comes in the form of hugging Vivek tight and remaining in that state “longer than necessary” that formed his memory of “an exquisite celebration” of Vivek’s birthday by the river Ambika.⁴⁰⁴ However, travelling to nature is also depicted with the element of danger and risk in Kaushik’s decision to set out to meet Vivek for one last time before he leaves for Rajkot for his new job; Kaushik braves the chilling winter and the dangerous roads through dense forests in the 35 kilometre ride on his bike late in the night to reach Vivek’s house in the village, making nature test, witness and testify for the irrepressible love for his beloved.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 222.

⁴⁰³ See Ibid., 270 & bid., 270 & 330.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 349.

⁴⁰⁵ See Ibid., 341—342.

3.2 – Travelling as Queer Pilgrimage

In her brilliant discussion on *dargahs*⁴⁰⁶ and temples as spaces testifying, celebrating, and sustaining narratives of same-sex desires in India, Madhavi Menon teases out a rough idea of ‘queer pilgrimage.’ In the context of the tomb of Jamali and Kamali⁴⁰⁷ located in the Mehrauli Archaeological Park in Delhi and the “mystery surrounding Jamali’s relationship with the mellifluously named Kamali, alongside whom he is buried,”⁴⁰⁸ Menon highlights how the Sufi *dargah* would have been a site of pilgrimage and gathering for *qawwals*⁴⁰⁹ and pilgrims had it not been out of bounds as a protected historical monument – one that she considers as “a classic case of killing history in the name of preserving it.”⁴¹⁰ Similarly, she discusses the *dargah* of Shah Hussain and Madho Lal as a space “paying tribute to the rich history of desire and transgression” as “thousands still gather at the *dargah* every year”⁴¹¹ and “devotees walk around [the tombs] paying homage to the lovers.”⁴¹² In her discussion of these two examples of spaces commemorating same-sex devotion and love (platonic or otherwise) between men, Menon highlights how the ‘*dargah* desire’ “testifies to the lack of boundaries in desire rather than instating new borders around it.”⁴¹³

Similarly, discussing the temple dedicated to the Hindu god Ayyappan⁴¹⁴ on the hill at Sabarimala, she points out how as “one of the few gods in the Hindu pantheon who actively

⁴⁰⁶ The tomb or shrine of a Muslim saint.

⁴⁰⁷ See Menon, *Desire*, 26–45. Menon informs that “‘Jamil’ is the pen name of Shaikh Hamid bin Fazlu’Allah, a Persian Sufi poet and traveller who died in 1536.” Ibid., 29. Regarding the mystery surrounding Kamali’s identity, she writes that “urban legend and local chatter favour the homosexual theory that Jamali and Kamali were lovers in life and death” Ibid., 31.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁰⁹ The performers of ‘*qawwali*’ which is a style of Muslim devotional music associated with Sufism.

⁴¹⁰ Menon, *Desire*, 32.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 39.

⁴¹² Ibid., 44.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 40.

⁴¹⁴ See Ibid., 77–78. Menon reminds us that Ayyappan is “the product of a coupling between Shiva and Vishnu.” According to one of the major version of the legend of Vishnu in his avatar as Mohini, the demon Bhasmasura, after “performing severe austerities,” asks for and receives a boon from Shiva to turn anything that he touches into ashes. However, when Bhasmasura “starts chasing” Shiva to harm him and “take over his power,” the latter “begs Vishnu for help,” who in turn, takes on the form of a beautiful woman called Mohini, “seduces Bhasmasura into submission,” and fools him to touch his own head, effectively destroying himself.

refuses to have sex with women by turning down offers of marriage,” his “celibacy is more than symbolic.”⁴¹⁵ Menon elicits from Ayyappan’s relationship with his Muslim friend Vavar – whose mosque must necessarily be visited by pilgrims before proceeding towards Ayyappan’s temple on the hill⁴¹⁶ – a queer reading of intimate same-sex relationship in the myth. She writes that “[l]ike the two men buried together in many dargahs, Ayyappan and Vavar preside together in Sabarimala,” that in Ayyappan’s advising of his father to “[c]onsider Vavar as [him]self” entails a “language of interchangeable mutability [generally] reserved for married couples,” and that “without suggesting that Ayyappan and Vavar should necessarily be considered a romantic couple, it is important to remember that the possibility of male-male union is not alien.”⁴¹⁷ Some novels included in this study entail similarly ‘queer’-ed understanding and imagination of undertaking a pilgrimage in the company of the beloved.

For example, in *The Boyfriend*, Yudi and Milind’s newly founded relationship does not stop at their queer marriage ceremony itself. The honeymoon that they undertake is in the form of a getaway to a remote and rural pilgrim town called Shravanabelagola in Karnataka. As Yudi grows desperate to spend more time with his beloved Milind, he “hits upon the idea of an outstation tour” where they could travel and enjoy each other’s company as lovers without actually being suspected of being a couple in the way a heterosexual duo would be.⁴¹⁸ After considering the usual options like Bodh Gaya, Goa, Kumbh Mela, and the Soundatti temple, they settle for a trip to see the seventeen metres high, naked statue of the Jain saint,

Later, Shiva requests to “see Vishnu in drag as Mohini,” and “when Vishnu obliges, Shiva is so flooded with passion that he spills his semen;” “the consequence of this encounter is Ayyappan.” Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁴¹⁶ In commenting upon the traditions of considering a friend as ‘second self’ vis-à-vis the example of Ayyapan and Vavar, Vanita mentions that “divine friends, like divine consorts, are commemorated together and worshipped together.” Vanita, *Rite*, 164.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 73–74.

⁴¹⁸ Rao, *Boyfriend*, 116.

Gomateshwara, at Shravanabelagola.⁴¹⁹ The selection of such a place, in the first instance, evokes an enactment of alterative spatial exploration, where the non-mainstream honeymoon destination is the site of gay gaze (upon the naked statue of the male god) and also the space of gay romance (in the rural landscape). The consummation of the marriage, so to say, in the form of the honeymoon, queers the traditions of the man-woman getaway by tapping into the potential of the rural space, by accessing the possibilities of romance in a rural locale, and by queering the idea of honeymoon-pilgrimage itself. It can also be seen through the lens of a ‘queer’-ed pilgrimage that has been undertaken to sanctify their (gay) romance, bless their (same-sex) union, and seek protection for their (queer) relationship from the divine so as to ward off evil – the general expectations that a pilgrimage can entail.

Queer pilgrimage is also represented in non-religious, secular terms – as a practice of repeated visits to and travels in nature as an alterative form of creating personal pilgrimage spaces. For example, in *Terminal Love*, yearly visits with Vikram to various tourist towns in India – especially to Srinagar and the Dal Lake – provide for Sultan to vent out his frustration and live out a different version of him that this HIV+ status otherwise made impossible in Mumbai. Their get-away ‘pilgrimage’-like trips to the lap of nature, specifically the soothing waters of Srinagar, help Sultan come to terms with his deteriorating health, and the ensuing rage and desperation that spill out in the form of tiffs with Vikram help make the latter understand what Sultan must be going through, effectively bringing them closer despite the worst that the trips brought out in their relationship.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹ See *Ibid.*, 117–118.

⁴²⁰ See Arora, *Love*, 137–147.

3.3 – Travelling as Queer Re-location

In his discussion on landscapes of ‘erotic alienation,’ Gordon Brent Ingram poignantly notes that “most people whose sexualities have been ‘marginalised’ through some experience of same-sex desire, who therefore feel or are made to feel ‘queer,’ travel great distances in order to live in the ways that enhance fuller contact with one another.”⁴²¹ Similarly, the characters in the novels travel to and re-locate themselves in new spaces of possibilities in hope of ‘queer re-location’ that would allow them to live their lives with their desires and beloveds. However, the ‘queer re-location’ is also informed by/through a strategic and agential re-visioning of the ‘natural’ (close to nature, and subsequently organic?) in a politics similar to what Jonathan Dollimore has talked of, in the context of a ‘perverse dynamics’ in Oscar Wilde’s writing, as a claim to authenticity made through a rhetorical strategy of ‘transgressive reinscription,’⁴²² whereby an authorised discourse (in this case, the ‘natural’-ness of nature) is appropriated for counter-hegemonic use.

R. Raj Rao makes use of the relocation trope in two of his novels where the shift to natural spaces plays a crucial role in the conclusion of the gay romance plot. As opposed to the temporary tour of Milind and Yudi to the hills at Shravanabelagola in *The Boyfriend*, Jeevan and Sandesh in *Lady Lolita’s Lover* “leave Bombay and begin a new life, in a remote, peaceful, idyllic, pastoral, prelapsarian place.”⁴²³ This ‘shift’ is especially interesting for through a relocation and restoration to the natural, a ‘natural’-ness of queer desires, love, practices, and relations is inherently implied. Jeevan and Sandesh make their home the hills of Meghalaya, Shillong, Tura, and finally Kodaikanal where the narrative depicts the spatial positivity and potency of their rural venture though the use of the natural metaphor of a rare

⁴²¹ Ingram, “Marginality,” 27.

⁴²² See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33, 307–325.

⁴²³ Rao, *Lover*, 289.

flower: “[t]heir arrival would coincide with the blossoming of the purple-coloured *kurinji* flower, which blossoms once in twelve years [...]”⁴²⁴ The restricted and restrictive space of the metropolis available to Milind and Yudi’s queer romantic relation in *The Boyfriend’s* Mumbai gets absolved by the liberating and reconciliatory spatial agency in *Lady Lolita’s Lover*, where the alterative space of nature extends beyond the margins that would have otherwise shackled the gay lovers:

Their story would have a fairy-tale ending. Sandy would be by his [Jeevan’s] side at all times, but as a fellow traveller, not as an escort. They would transcend bodily passion and achieve a state of nirvana that would enable them to see, several times over, the blooming of the *kurinji* flower.⁴²⁵

Ingram notes that “[t]he spaces that we cross and in which we live-to which we adapt, create, and sometimes reconstruct-have great bearing on how we come to express ourselves.”⁴²⁶ When understood in this context, the urban perspective of being ‘out’ or made known or visibilised doesn’t seem to adequately help in locating and interrogating rural queer spaces. As Lesley Marple puts it, “[t]he rural context presents a different societal structure, and a different environment within which queers must consider the degree to which they choose to be out,” and therefore, “[r]ural queers may label their queerness differently as a strategy.”⁴²⁷ Similarly, in *Vivek and I*, for example, non-urban spaces and the relocation to the lap of nature gets depicted and portrayed as a crucial element of the plot itself. The setting of the novel being rural Valai in a woody, mountainous region of the state of Gujarat, issues of the potential that a life away from the scrutinising and condemning gaze of the city and its relation to the possibilities of developing and sustaining the desiring of gay romance get invested in agential symbolism. Kaushik is portrayed not only as a great lover of nature but

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 290.

⁴²⁶ Ingram, “Marginality,” 27.

⁴²⁷ Marple, “Rural,” 72.

also as a beneficiary of its various potentials as he taps into the positive solace – a liberating escape – of nature after his agonising experiences in Baroda – both in his love life and familial-social circles.

Situated “at the heart of the primitive district named the Dangs,” Valai not only helps Kaushik “heal the wounds of [his] past”⁴²⁸ but also allows him to find love anew. Though, initially, Kaushik feels restless residing in a place devoid of the urban familiarity, Kaushik confesses that “the thing that kept [him] from leaving Valai was Vivek,”⁴²⁹ positing in the remote town the indelible link between space and love. The various places in Valai and its surrounding areas of natural verdure and rural simplicity allows for the intimate relationship of trust and affection between Kaushik and Vivek to develop and flourish, depicting the role and agency of what has been termed the ‘gay pastoral’ (as discussed earlier). It reflects on Mortimer-Sandilands’ claim that “homoerotic literary and artistic traditions have been used to [re-]imagine a queer history, a queer space, and indeed a queer nature: the idealized, bucolic ‘naturalness’ of pastoral homoeroticism” that “calls into question the idea that heterosexuality is the only ‘natural’ sex around.”⁴³⁰

Furthermore, Kaushik mentions that he is thankful to Valai and its people as the place “had helped [him] meet the real person inside [him].”⁴³¹ Even though Valai does not become the place where he eventually manages to pronounce his love for Vivek and/or physically transform his love for Vivek into reality, it does provide the space for re-discovering his understanding of romance and relationships and for the desiring for the beloved. This relates to Mortimer-Sandilands claim that the idea of ‘place’ and ‘space’ is both complex and agential for the LGBTQ+ individuals “who insist politically and ontologically on a trans-

⁴²⁸ Patel, *Vivek*, 4.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴³⁰ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction,” 4.

⁴³¹ Patel, *Vivek*, 27.

local queering of the (hetero-)naturalization of sexuality and nature through understandings of hybridity, mobility, artifice and performativity [...].”⁴³² The crux of the narrative in *Vivek and I* resolves around the passionate desiring for the young man, making Valai, and his relocation to the rural space – the ‘natural’ facilitator of the renewed faith in love for another man and the possibility of romance in Kaushik’s life. The contrast of the spatial politics of Valai’s non-urbanity reflects in the fact that though Kaushik wishes to take Vivek to Baroda for a visit, he decides against such a ‘shift’ as he fears recognition of Vivek as his “gay interest” in the scheming city would potentially derail his life that has “seemed to be back on track” in Valai.⁴³³

After the departure of Vivek and his marriage to a girl, the places in Valai that memorialised their relationship haunt him.⁴³⁴ However, he hesitates shifting back to an urban setting – he believes that such a move will be futile as Vivek’s memories. On the contrary, he reflects that his love for the boy has become embedded in nature and its elements, specifically in the form of the neem tree that functions as an important marker and symbol of his desires for Vivek. In the periodic use of pathetic fallacy, the neem tree becomes the embodiment of Kaushik himself and itself transforms into a character and metaphorical nature in its role in the narrative of Kaushik – of his desires, his grief, and his eventual conciliation with a life of asceticism. A such, nature, its spaces, and its elements provide for Kaushik a romantic love made of *amour passion* (as theorised by Giddens) – a specific cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to transcendence” where “romantic love may end in tragedy, and feed upon transgression, but also produces triumph, a conquest of mundane prescriptions and compromises.”⁴³⁵

⁴³² Mortimer-Sandilands, “Ecocritical Orientations,” 66.

⁴³³ Patel, *Vivek and I*, 322.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁴³⁵ Giddens, *Intimacy*, 45.

Chapter Four

ON ‘OTHER’ SPACES OF/FOR GAY ROMANCE

Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta, in their emphasis on considering and analysing the various interactions and interrelations between sexualities and spaces, aver that ‘Queer Studies,’ in studying non-heteronormative sexualities and their cultures, must also include discussions on “the erotic dimensions of [the] virtual [in addition to real] spaces.”⁴³⁶ Their commentary on the various ‘virtual’ spaces of non-normative and same-sex subjectivities, cultures, and politics provides the contexts of the digital/cyber queer and of alterative forms of queer kinship as apt examples. Similarly, in the context of the audacity of/in non-heteronormative pleasures, Brinda Bose has similarly highlighted upon the role and importance of both real and virtual spaces where “the pursuit of sexual pleasure snatches from under the noses of the moral police” the constraints on and regulation of same-sex desires and intimacies.⁴³⁷ As examples of such strategic and agential spaces, she lists “bushes in parks, seats at the back of buses, the dark of movie theatres, the anonymity of internet chatrooms, homes, and workplaces in the everyday business of living.”⁴³⁸

Agreeing with Bakshi, Dasgupta, and Bose’s claims regarding the need to look into ‘other’ possible spaces and domains of ‘queer’ lives, experiences, and politics and taking cue from their relevant examples, this chapter explores and interrogates such ‘other’ spaces of/for gay romance as entailed in and re-presented through the literary insights of the novels

⁴³⁶ Bakshi and Dasgupta, *Queer Studies*, 19.

⁴³⁷ Bose, *Audacity*, 9.

⁴³⁸ Ibid. Furthermore, Bose asserts that in the fight for claiming such spaces, “queering must be raging and carnivalesque at once, a gay that protests, resists, chooses, loves, desires, kisses, caresses, copulates, orgasms – in whatever way it ‘wants’ the other, simply and yet complicatedly being propelled to bodily pleasure and passion by sexual urges, oblivious to what the law allows or does not.” Ibid., 272. The novels included in this study seem to have religiously adhered to this politics of same-sex desiring and of gay romance.

included in this study. By the term ‘other,’ I do not mean ‘otherised’ – the construct of the differently margin(alised) – but an understanding of the often neglected and/or unconsidered – the idea of the differentially agential. As such, the ‘virtual’ in this understanding of spaces as the ‘other’ does not entail literal and generalised non-corporeality but aims at including insights into the spatial multiplicity and complexity of locations – tangible, intangible, and inter-tangible. The novels variedly include, refer to, and make ample use of such ‘other’ spaces of/for same-sex intimacies, desires, despairs of/in love that not only problematise the idea of gay romance but also offer a plethora of contexts – of connections and communities, of manipulations and negotiations, and of memories and remembrances.

4.1 – Virtual Loves: Online Dating Sites

Rohit K. Dasgupta rightly notes that “[t]he emergence of the Internet has had a profound impact on human life” as “[b]y destabilizing the boundaries between the private and public, new spaces have opened for social interaction and community formation”⁴³⁹ where “online queer identities are articulated as a position against the hegemony of a singular imagined past.”⁴⁴⁰ As such, ‘cyberspace’ and its spatial politics have reshaped our imagination(s) relating to sex, sexualities, and sexual politics. Possibilities of same-sex interaction and intimacy has been increased manifold by the advent of virtual online spaces such as dating sites and apps since the beginning of the 21st century, courtesy to the digital boom in urban contexts and the growing demands for technological modes of communication and community-building, especially among the sexual minorities in India.

⁴³⁹ Rohit K. Dasgupta, “Online Romeos and Gay-dia: Exploring Queer Spaces in Digital India,” in *Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy, Queer Studies and Education*, ed. Elizabeth McNeil et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 189.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

Brown and Knopp have pointed out that the domain of the cyber/virtual ‘queer spaces’ can and should “be fleshed out much more by considerations of such phenomena as sex cruising in chat rooms [...] and the role of cyberspace in reshaping gender, sexuality and sex play.”⁴⁴¹ The crux of the politics of agency lies in the fact that “sexual minority groups, and/or those groups deemed sexually deviant, limited by the constraints of space, are able to interact through virtual media,”⁴⁴² effectively investing in the ‘virtual sex environments’ an agency of intimacy and in the process, shaping ‘a new reality.’⁴⁴³ However, one must remember that the virtual space online is actually not a ‘place,’ but “a locus around which modes of social interaction, commercial interests, and other discursive and imaginative practices coalesce.”⁴⁴⁴ As such, the modalities and negotiations that the queer ‘users’ utilise in such ‘spaces’ are crucial towards constructing and de-constructing the politics of same-sex intimacy and possibilities of same-sex romance via the plethora of virtual ‘sites.’

In the Indian contexts, Dasgupta has provided the first in-depth study on same-sex and queer digital and online cultures of/in India. Claiming that “the various practices through which queer men engage with a digital culture [have] permeated and become an integral part of queer social life in India,”⁴⁴⁵ Dasgupta’s ethnographic research highlights how important it is to “acknowledge the connectedness between online and offline spaces”⁴⁴⁶ towards understanding and studying same-sex cultures in contemporary India. Specifically, in the context of same-sex ‘virtual intimacies’ on/in online and digital ‘queer platforms’ and spaces, he explores how same-sex relations and intimacies can be and are mediated through technology, and how “multifaceted, complex and sometimes contradictory” the ways in

⁴⁴¹ Brown and Knopp, “Geographies,” 318.

⁴⁴² Chris Ashford, “Queer Theory, Cyber-Ethnographies and Researching Online Sex Environments,” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 18, no. 3 (2009): 299.

⁴⁴³ See *Ibid.*, 303.

⁴⁴⁴ Dasgupta, “Gay-dia,” 190.

⁴⁴⁵ Rohit K. Dasgupta, *Digital Queer Cultures in India: Politics, Intimacies and Belonging* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 1.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

which “queer male community engages with the digital medium” can be and through which they “understand, access and perform their sexual identities with the context of the nation and their local spaces.”⁴⁴⁷

Dasgupta discusses how the advent of the digital era in Indian in the beginning of the 21st century has also resulted in the emergence of the ‘cyberqueer’ that functions through/in spaces of the digital and the virtual in ways that include visible agency, various restrictions, and potential resistances.⁴⁴⁸ Within this understanding of the cyberqueer spaces, he also discusses, through case studies and narratives, how online sites and platforms have provided for new ways of articulating, initiating, manipulating, and sustaining same-sex intimacies, relations, friendship, desires, romance, connections, and kinship.⁴⁴⁹ In a similar understanding, elsewhere, Utsa Mukherjee and I have analysed visual and textual archives that the internet makes available to gay men in India and that help them construct social imaginaries inaccessible to them in their immediate milieu.⁴⁵⁰ By offering a study of selected blogs and websites produced by and targeted towards gay men in India, we have theorised on the emergence and operation of a digital ‘gay gaze’ that turns the ‘male gaze’ upon the male body, mooring the political agency of same-sex desires through a cultural appropriation of online spaces.

The explosion in contemporary trends in same-sex interaction via the internet has been widespread as far as the metropolis is concerned and, now, in-roads into the non-urban spaces too have added to the booming potential of such alterative ‘queerscapes’ and ‘sites’ of queer desires, performance, and consumption. Examples such as Orinam, PlanetRomeo,

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴⁸ See Ibid., 34–39.

⁴⁴⁹ See chapter 3 of Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Utsa Mukherjee and Anil Pradhan, “‘The Self on the Web’: The Homosocial and the ‘Textuality’ of Representations,” paper presented at the annual Ramakrishna Mission Residential College (RKMRC) Inter-university Students’ Seminar on ‘Interdisciplinarity: Modes and Practices,’ Kolkata, India, April, 2015.

Grindr, Hornet, Blued, etc. have become synonymous with the rise in the consumerism focussed on and entailed in the queer capital in an age of digital networking. The effects of such a digital culture that makes available to the (until-recently) criminalised sexual ‘other’ a relatively safe space of desiring, performativity, interaction, and kinships not only spills into the physical world of same-sex intimacy but has also been referenced and represented in the fiction dealing with gay romance in contemporary India. Akhil Katyal’s research on the various ‘idioms of same-sex desires’ in ‘modern’ India in the context of such online and virtual platforms as mentioned earlier has brought to the fore how non-heteronormative and gay men “initiate and inhabit various kinds of intimacies” on such platforms.⁴⁵¹ While commenting on the ‘doubleness’ that the idioms of same-sex desires encompass in the context of virtual intimacies on ‘gay’ chat and dating sites, he documents and explains how (homo)sexual and ‘queer’ identities get articulated through and articulative of complex processes of interactions within a ‘gay scene,’⁴⁵² as a subcultural phenomenon vis-à-vis the constructs of queer communities,⁴⁵³ and as a continuance and refashioning of the ideals and cultures of romantic love.⁴⁵⁴ A couple of the ‘gay romance’ texts included in this study relate to and reflect upon similar ideas and constructs of relations, desires, intimacies, and love on/through virtual media and on/at online platforms.

For example, in *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn*, Saaranish and Akshay are only able to meet in Chandigarh due to the online medium. Similarly, in *Terminal Love*, Vikram confesses early on in the novel that the virtual world of same-sex interaction and dating provided him with a newfound freedom and courage to express his desires and act upon them: “Living in the virtual world of deception and make-believe, I began to explore

⁴⁵¹ Katyal, *Doubleness*, 118.

⁴⁵² See *Ibid.*, 124–127.

⁴⁵³ See *Ibid.*, 130–132.

⁴⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, 136–143.

and revel in my new avatar.”⁴⁵⁵ However, Vikram also reminds the reader that all is not well in such spaces of virtual providing possibilities of same-sex intimacy. Masquerading on such sites meant for a safer and private relations, he informs that “where the real Vikram was reserved, withdrawn, and a person of few words – [his] alter ego ‘KhattaMittha’ was outgoing, gregarious, caustic witty and flamboyant”⁴⁵⁶ – becoming someone that he is not, but at the same time, making use of the spatial politics of online sites to his own ‘queer’ benefits. Though the anonymity afforded by such virtual spaces of interactions and intimacies may be understood as enabling users to create false identities, it must also be understood that there is a need to “accept not only the fluidity of ‘reality’ that queer presents, but queer’s very fluidity as an idea at any given point in time,”⁴⁵⁷ as exemplified in/by such sites of queer identities and desires. Vikram’s interactions with other ‘queer’ men on the unspecified online social networking site also help him form an ‘queer’ kinship group that shares within its space aspirations, intimacies, and apprehensions, albeit based within a virtual-ness of spatiality. However, as is generally portrayed, the virtual interactions with men do turn corporeal in the form of dating in clubs and pubs.

In *You Are Not Alone*, the protagonist Sanjay is able to physically experiment with men and consequently solidify his identity as a gay man only through his interaction with men on a fictional website called ‘menforboys.com’ that allows him to reach out to Gautam with whom he partakes in physical sexual intimacy for the first time in his life.⁴⁵⁸ Upon the enquiry of his friends on how he manages to meet guys, Sanjay replies with conviction that “an online networking website is the best medium to use”⁴⁵⁹ and even allows them a peek into how the online gay dating scene works. However, the novel does not present the online

⁴⁵⁵ Arora, *Love*, 9.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Ashford, “Queer Theory,” 308.

⁴⁵⁸ Mirchandani, *Alone*, 57–58.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 65.

gay dating scene as a completely positive space either. Sanjay confesses that he is “just looking for frivolous no-strings-attached sex” and unsurprisingly, “logging on to www.menforboys.com had become a part of [his] daily routine.”⁴⁶⁰ However, he is also made to witness the uglier side of such virtual spaces where, apart from outright indecency, he realises that caution is the key to such forms of possible same-sex interaction owing to issues of potential harm and violence.⁴⁶¹

4.2 – Now You See Me, Now You Don’t: Manipulated ‘Private-in-the-Public’ or Strategic Closets?

Online sites do not function as the only ‘other’ space of/for the negotiation of same-sex intimacy and relations in the novels; the characters also make use of manipulated in-between spaces. In relation to the strategies adopted and manipulated for same-sex interactions between men, elsewhere, I have proposed taking into account the intertwining of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ in space, while emphasising the necessity of adhering to these concepts, in studying the politics and praxis of intimacies.⁴⁶² Similarly, Richard Phillips and Diane Watt have pointed to the limitations of/in the investigations of real and imagined ‘geographies of sexualities’ that end up being polarised as either the sexualised-centre or the marginal-other, discounting spaces that can be differently agential and discursive – such as the ‘in-between’ space.⁴⁶³ In their call for a de-centring of sexualities, they consider liminal or in-between spaces as “ambivalent sites of critical power but also of danger;”⁴⁶⁴ this brings to mind the ‘closet’ as a key socio-spatial marker of the ‘liminal’ and the ‘in-between.’

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁶¹ See Ibid.

⁴⁶² Pradhan, “Out Gay, In-Between.”

⁴⁶³ Phillips and Watt, “Introduction,” 1.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

Within the context of the emerging field of cultural geography, Brown and Knopp note that the archetypal construct of the ‘closet’ has become one of the key points of contingency regarding queer sexual subjectivities and ‘becoming’ in specific relation to the ‘closet’ as functioning on multiple levels of space including the body, the city, the nation, and the globe.⁴⁶⁵ Knopp also comments upon the agential politics of the ‘private’ in the ‘public’ socialisation of sexual identities and ‘markings.’⁴⁶⁶ As such, the construct of the ‘private-in-the-public’ queer sexualities can be considered a crucial subject in terms of spatial politics. Furthermore, Brown’s discussion of the spatial textualisation of the ‘closet’ vis-à-vis sexualities, spaces, and desires presents the spatial metaphor of the ‘closet’ as “an appropriate venue to explore the geography of same-sex desire” as it “highlights the fact that desire has a materiality” and thus, “demarcates or maps desires and their flows between subjects.”⁴⁶⁷ In the context of Neil Miller’s texts mapping the geographies of desires in America, Brown states that in constituting and problematising same-sex sexual desire, the ‘closet’ features and functions within a politics of Deleuzian ‘deterritorialization’ that empowers “spaces productively carved out within the closet where desire could be pursued” as portraying “a certain degree of resistance emerging from the productive, generative aspects of desire.”⁴⁶⁸

The novels included in this study too depict the use of such similar ‘private’ spaces carved out of the daily general public and semi-public spaces through strategic queering of spaces of same-sex desires and intimacies as private-in-the-public. One example is the strategic use of the closet-space of the bathroom in the boys’ hostel as discussed in the first chapter. In the strategic utility of such ‘public’-ly shared spaces, the narratives encompass a blurring of the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ in the specific context of ‘queer spaces,’ where the

⁴⁶⁵ See Brown and Knopp, “Geographies,” 315–316, 322.

⁴⁶⁶ See Knopp, “Space,” 140–144.

⁴⁶⁷ Michael Brown, “Travelling through the Closet,” in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, ed. James Duncan and Derek Gregory (London: Routledge, 1999), 185, 187–188.

⁴⁶⁸ See *Ibid.*, 193–195.

ideas and constructs of the private/personal/coupled get coextended into and saturated by the public/social/communal, albeit through a politics of manipulation, negotiation invested in the ‘making’ of ‘queer space.’

For example, in *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn*, after Saaransh and Akshay’s temporary break-up, they meet at the parking basement of a café where they come to terms with their relationship and the issues that led to problems in it. Culminating towards reconciliation, Akshay and Saaransh sort out the issue and share a moment of intimacy in the basement.⁴⁶⁹ As their intimacy heals the rift in their relationship, it transforms the space of the negatively dark basement parking lot earlier described with walls into a personal space of stabilising hope, passion, and possibilities. Even as Saaransh vents his concerns regarding their intimacy being witnessed by people, Akshay’s unrelenting continuance of their amorous affair speaks of a new found freedom to express and invest in love between men that claims spatial prospects. Similarly, later, at a pub when Saaransh gets drunk and Akshay takes him to the lobby to recover, the former incites the latter into a sexual encounter that, notwithstanding the public nature of the space, takes the form of assertive sensuousness that involves Akshay silently pressing his lips against Saaransh’s neck, and ends on a warm note of Saaransh openly professing his love for Akshay for the first time.⁴⁷⁰ It is in such private-in-the-public spaces as the basement and the lobby that defining moments of passion and conciliation take place in the romance of Saaransh and Akshay through their agential carving out of intimate spaced for themselves.

Similarly, in *You Are Not Alone*, as a part of what Sanjay terms as his “sexcapades” in the city of Mumbai, Sanjay’s sexual intimacy with a rich south Mumbai man named Farhan while on the roads of the city depicts the utility of urban possibilities: “While we were out on

⁴⁶⁹ Sood, *Dreams*, 63.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

a drive in his car, it didn't matter whether his car was in motion or not, we made out like two wild animals in an urban jungle."⁴⁷¹ Furthermore, Sanjay and his sex-partner make strategic use of the private-in-the-public space through the former's agential manipulation of the 'home' space for the purpose of same-sex intimacy: "I looked at the dimly lit staircase of the building I stayed at [...] I did have sex that night, in the dimly lit stair case right outside my apartment door while my parents were inside sleeping."⁴⁷²

In *Seahorse*, the swimming pool of a hotel that Nicholas takes Nehemiah to practice swimming is portrayed as a similar strategic space for same-sex desiring and of proximate intimacy, as is literally testing the waters in/of their budding relationship.⁴⁷³ While *Seahorse* metaphorises the element of water in the context of the intimate relationship between Nicholas and Nehemiah, *The Other Guy* presents the pool as a tangible dimension of homoerotic desiring of Anuj for Nikhil. In *The Other Guy*, Anuj joins the same swimming club and slot as Nikhil in order to gain proximity to his beloved, while also gazing at his body in a sexual manner. Even as the swimming pool is full of other young men, Anuj "lived for those moments, those guilty pleasures," venting his desiring in a negotiated space of same-sex interactions where "the little secret [that he] had stashed away in a wild corner of [his] mind" spills into and materialises as a personal-ised portion of the swimming pool itself.⁴⁷⁴ Evidently, the sessions at the swimming pool become for Anuj a series of "a fine dive into the pool of ecstasy" that led his "twisted infatuation [to] slowly grow into a fatal obsession."⁴⁷⁵ While admiring the beauty of Nikhil's body glistening with the water, Anuj desires to spend

⁴⁷¹ Mirchandani, *Alone*, 73.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁷³ Pariat, *Seahorse*, 78–80.

⁴⁷⁴ Mehrotra, *Guy*, 40.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

more hours at the pool with him to know each other better and to eventually profess his love for him.⁴⁷⁶

It is not just the swimming pool that Anuj and Nikhil claim as their own in the context of same-sex intimacy. The consummation of their love and desires for each other takes place in an empty college bus parked in the hostel's premises which they bolt themselves up in and partake in a session of passionate intimacy notwithstanding the fear of turning into a potential spectacle.⁴⁷⁷ As the "beautiful chemistry held [Anuj] in thrall – of wild, desperate and obsessive love"⁴⁷⁸ inside the bus, Nikhil reminds Anuj that the two important elements in love are "surprise and excitement; the feeling that this moment cannot be replicated."⁴⁷⁹ This intimate encounter – both in its corporeality and sensuality – could have taken place in the hostel room, but the very space of the private-in-the-public is made to stand as a testimony to their romantic intertwining (both in a closet and also 'out'-ed through it) – at once secretive and also concurrently agential in its, as Brinda Bose would call it, 'audacity of pleasure' in the context of same-sex and non-heteronormative erotic desiring.⁴⁸⁰ Later, when discussing with his friend Niharika about how lovers manage to find spaces (or rather, manage to carve them out) for the purpose of intimacies, he sums up the fact-of-the-matter rather eloquently in his claim: "[e]very place should be put to the best possible use. And people do love to use spaces differently."⁴⁸¹ The other key incident that adequately reflects this principle of Anuj is the one where, consumed in burning passion for each other after an emotionally draining fight, Anuj and Nikhil engage in an erotically charged session of sexual intercourse in a dark alley near the Faculty area on the college's premises.⁴⁸² Depicted in its raw sensual and

⁴⁷⁶ See *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁷⁷ See *Ibid.*, 112–114.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁸⁰ See Brinda Bose, *Audacity*, 3–5.

⁴⁸¹ Mehrotra, *Guy*, 140.

⁴⁸² See *Ibid.*, 152–153.

sexual performance where “desire exploded with glorious intensity,” Anuj and Nikhil court danger and risk in the thrill of love and desiring⁴⁸³ – an event that the narrative memorialises in the context of both ‘gay romance’ and, especially, of its strategic spatial politics of being simultaneously in the open and in the hiding.

In the geographies of non-normative sexualities and desires, the presence and role of the ubiquitous (and often unsuspecting) cinema halls in the novels comes as an interesting insight into spaces that are strategically utilised for same-sex intimacies. Rao’s novels depict the utility and the queering of the space of the cinema hall in the specific context of same-sex intimacy between men. For example, in *The Boyfriend*, after Yudi and Milind solemnise their marriage in the form of the ritual as discussed in chapter 2, they visit a local cinema hall as a substitute for their honeymoon; there they watch a film while covertly taking part in sexual intimacy.⁴⁸⁴ Similarly, in *Hostel Room 131*, the discussions and interpretations of popular Bollywood films and their cinematic portrayal of same-sex relations between men⁴⁸⁵ complement the actual sexual intimacy between the protagonists; Siddharth and Sudhir make use of the darkened space of the Hindi cinema hall while on their dates in Pune to their benefit. On their very first outing in the city, Siddharth leads Sudhir to watch *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* at a ramshackle cinema hall called Deccan Talkies where they strategically seat themselves in a space that could be utilised to partake in same-sex intimacy. The space of the cinema hall provides the men with adequate conditions for engaging in sexual acts: “It was dark and there was no one in close proximity. Siddharth undid Sudhir’s fly and shoved his hand into his trousers.”⁴⁸⁶ Contrary to the reluctance that he had earlier demonstrated in Siddharth’s nudges for physical intimacy in the openly public spaces, Sudhir now allows

⁴⁸³ See *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁸⁴ Rao, *Boyfriend*, 109.

⁴⁸⁵ Rao, *Hostel*, 56, 85, 93–94, 106, 130.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

Siddharth to continue with his activity and even takes charge of the situation, guiding the latter's hands towards sexual pleasure.

As explicated through the discussions of the manipulated 'private-in-the-public' or 'strategic closets' in the novels, efforts on the level of the personal and the public can be considered to work towards an accessing and creating 'in-between' spaces of assertion, belonging, and loving. Through continuous attempts at the reterritorialisation of spaces, the bringing together of the private and the public aims at enabling the visibility of non-normative sexual subcultures that resist and rupture hegemonic heteronormative constructs and ideas of spaces that are more often than not the source of their marginal and stigmatised status. The resultant spaces create for themselves the possibility of autonomous formations that enter into a dialogue with the inter-personal relationship shared by the lovers and help validate the articulate of their 'gay romance.'

4.3 – Remember Me, Love: Queer(ing) Spaces of Memory

In the context of the idea of 'queer melancholia,' Judith Butler claims that compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia are exemplary of the social relations by which only certain attachments are rendered as real, and therefore, grievable; given that certain kinds of losses "compelled by a set of culturally prevalent prohibitions [...] signal the internalization of the ungrieved homosexual cathexis;" and that "where there is no public recognition or discourse through which such a loss might be named and mourned," queer melancholia becomes revelatory of a much broader set of cultural phenomena.⁴⁸⁷ Following Butler, Mortimer-Sandilands notes that "melancholia suggests not only a complex process in which the multiple traumas, losses, and systematic violences of contemporary life are made corporeally

⁴⁸⁷ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 139.

and temporally present, but also an ethical relationship to the past that acknowledges its perpetual incompleteness and contingency.”⁴⁸⁸

In the Indian context, as discussed in the “Introduction,” queer melancholia is transformed into trials of/for same-sex love through loss and suffering and is embedded in and represented through the element of *vipralambha* or *viraha* that feature as a *force majeure* in the ‘gay romance’ plot of several novels included in this study. In the context of ‘love-in-separation,’ the conspiracy of memory, of remembering, and of grieving in/through space plays a crucial role in the development of the love stories and in their denouements. For example, the erotic spatialisation of memory in *The Other Guy* is entailed in the memory of love, romance, and longing. When Nikhil is temporarily out of the country, Anuj remembers his past intimacies with him by visiting such spaces of remembrance that allow him to relive their passionate experiences. Infused with the element of ‘*viraha*,’ Anuj revisits spaces of their intimacies; one such space is the tea-stall of Balram Chacha (in their hostel’s premises) near the guard’s room where they occasionally indulged in sexual intimacy and where the aroma of coffee being brewed brought back the memory of their intense love-making sessions.⁴⁸⁹ This is one of the many examples of the spatial transference of the element of *vipralambha* that exemplifies love-in-separation and that encodes the ‘gay romance’ plots in a marking of places, lovers, and memories; in this infusion are included ports of arrival and departure, cities as spaces of heartbreaks, and hills and forests.

⁴⁸⁸ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 340.

⁴⁸⁹ See Mehrotra, *Guy*, 138.

4.3.1 – Trains, Buses, and Stations

Ports of arrival and departure traditionally feature as spaces of desiring and of remembrance, functioning in both positively and negatively invested elements of romance and relationships. For example, in *Hostel Room 131*, trains and train stations provide several instances of insight into the intensity of the intricacies – often painful, often hopeful – of the ‘gay romance’ between Siddharth and Sudhir. The first time that Siddharth departs from Pune, leaving his beloved Sudhir behind, is depicted in hurried poignancy. As the train pulls out of the station, “Siddharth hugged Sudhir and kissed him on both cheeks, his eyes full of tears” and as Siddharth alights the moving train, “Sudhir grasped his head and kissed it,”⁴⁹⁰ making for an almost Bollywood-ised episode of the parting of grieving lovers. In the train, Siddharth further continues with his new found grief at the parting with his beloved: “[...] suddenly, he burst into tears and had to rush to the toilet where he sobbed and wailed like a professional mourner for a full twenty minutes.”⁴⁹¹ It is also in one of such departures by train that, overtaken by the grief of parting, Siddharth resolves to spend all his weekends in Pune with his beloved Sudhir.⁴⁹²

However, trains are also the effector of the romance between Siddharth and Sudhir; they allow Siddharth to make regular, though lengthy, commutes between Mumbai (where Siddharth lives) and Pune (where Sudhir resides) for the sake of love. What the train often does in terms of torturing by running late, the train station makes up in providing the exhilarating joy of meeting the beloved. At their first re-union, Siddharth and Sudhir hug and even kiss at a poorly lit Shivajinagar train station at night.⁴⁹³ Even at the moment of departure and pain after their break up later in the novel, the train transforms into a character; as

⁴⁹⁰ Rao, *Hostel*, 49.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

Siddharth sits inside the train's compartment, the train "becomes [his] tranquilizer, lulling [him] to sleep," and the train's movement becomes a "lullaby" for Siddharth's agitated and defeated mind and lovelorn heart.⁴⁹⁴ Again, the train station as Shivajinagar turns into a space of their chance meeting a couple of months later, providing for a fateful "reunion full of anguish, the reunion of lovers turned enemies," when he "reads the poetry, the earnestness in his eyes."⁴⁹⁵

The space of the bus stand also features as a character in Siddharth and Sudhir's love story; it is invested with hopes of reunion for a desperate Siddharth searching for his beloved Sudhir. For several hours, Siddharth scours buses entering the State Transport bus stand at Kolhapur where, as he recalls, Sudhir might arrive for attending a wedding ceremony. The role of the bus and the bus stand is portrayed with a spatial marking of gay romance in its hopeful perseverance and optimism against fate's cruel workings, as depicted in the *modus operandi* of Siddharth for the buses: "I check each alighting passenger, hoping against hope that one of them will be Su. The sight of an arriving bus makes my heart leap because every new bus has the potential to unite me with my obsession."⁴⁹⁶

4.3.2 – The City (of Heartbreaks)

The city itself features as a key character in the love stories of many of the novels, serving as both the facilitator and begetter of the memories of gay romance. To this, the weight of infinite memories that emerge and remain as reminders of gay romance also act as points of 'locating' such narratives – both lived experiences and literary representations. Kaustav Bakshi's take on this aspect of how spaces make relations and vice versa provides

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 167.

for an interesting consideration of the idea of what he terms the ‘city of heartbreaks.’ Located in the spatial-literary boundaries of the city of Kolkata in the time period of October-November, 2018, Bakshi posted a series of 5 personal notes/posts on Facebook. They refer to and deal with the ‘heartbreak’ that the metropolis, and its various spaces, exudes and frames for the ‘queer’ inhabitant who reminiscences over past intimate experiences in the form of looking back at spaces and their potent connotations of desires, possibilities, and non-closures. For examples, specifically referring to the Durga Puja festivities in October, Bakshi writes about the city’s indelible links with loneliness: “A fiercely festive Kolkata, for many, erupts with a sense of loss, of agony, of dejection, spilling the roads, parks and alleyways with the burning lava of memories yet to be overwritten or not be overwritten at all.”⁴⁹⁷ However, the ‘burden’ of the ‘city of heartbreaks’ does not sustain itself in isolation; it always already is enthused in the process of same-sex desiring vis-à-vis space, as Bakshi retells:

‘Play me a boyfriend’, a friend was asked by a random Facebook acquaintance. He wanted a temporal ‘pujo prem’ to fill in the vacuum of not having a partner as the city was lashed by a tsunamic carnival. Some laughed over it, some grimaced, while some could feel the agony in that desire.⁴⁹⁸

In a way, Bakshi’s interpretation of the city and its relation to desiring and romancing co-relates to the narrativisation of spatial memory in the context of queer lives and their quotidian negotiations with it. He proposes that “[o]ne way of battling with the city of heartbreaks is to overwrite its roads, nooks and corners with new stories, with new characters.”⁴⁹⁹ As such, Bakshi reflects upon the ways in which the ‘city of heartbreaks’ can be as commonplace and fleeting and as real and non-fictive it is. In the novels included in this

⁴⁹⁷ Kaustav Bakshi, “City of Heartbreaks” on his Facebook page, accessed Jan. 17, 2019.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

study, the characters too seem to be deep into the clutches of the ‘city of heartbreaks;’ however, these narratives dwell upon the edges of both pain and longing and suffering and hope.

For example, in *Hostel Room 131*, Pune and its various places – including its cinema halls, restaurants, and roads that witnessed the blooming and persistence of same-sex relationships and intimacies – become markers for the romance between Siddharth and Sudhir. As a dejected Siddharth departs Pune, the town gets embedded in his memory as his beloved’s place and induces poignant remembrance for it: “So long, I say quietly, as the brightly lit streets of the town come into view and I nostalgically recall the good times when we trod these streets.”⁵⁰⁰ However, later, the city also transforms into a haunting for Siddharth; he feels “overwhelmed by memories” and wishes “to blot out from memory altogether. Pune and Su. Su and Pune”⁵⁰¹ – in a way, transforming the city into a metonymy for his beloved; as such, he “mourns at the thought of having to leave [the] enchanting city.”⁵⁰² Though he promises never to set foot on the soil of Pune again, the city and love draws him back again and again, speaking of the emotive power of *vipralambha*, as discussed earlier, and its spatial transference for the purpose sustaining the love in and through separation.

Similarly, in *Saraswati Park*, the city of Mumbai is invested with a duality of spatial memory where on the one hand, while returning home from Narayan’s house, Ashish loiters through the lanes of Saraswati Park and feels relaxed reminiscing about his days with Sunder and,⁵⁰³ and on the other hand, after his break-up with Narayan, Ashish feels helplessly defeated by his socio-personal ‘situation,’ as if the metonymical space of “Saraswati Park had

⁵⁰⁰ Rao, *Hostel*, 160–161.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵⁰³ See Joseph, *Park*, 210.

got him in the end.”⁵⁰⁴ Towards the end of the narrative, before leaving India for the US, Ashish loiters around in familiar places in Bombay to re-live his past experiences with the city and with love in the city,⁵⁰⁵ and arrives at the realisation that “his imminent departure nurtured [a] sudden passion for Bombay,”⁵⁰⁶ revealing the bittersweet relationship that Ashish has with the city and its many loves and heartbreaks.

Though the ‘city of heartbreaks’ embodies an idea of loss and of heartbrokenness, it is endowed with a life of its own – a character that always manages to play a crucial role in the lives of the lovers who reside in its various spaces. For example, in *The Other Guy*, New Delhi gets entangled in the very fabric of the romantic lives of the men. Acknowledging the indispensable part played by the city in his life, Anuj – living alone and periodically accompanied by his lover Nikhil – reflects upon the “unparalleled charm” that New Delhi has – one that both haunts him with memories of the past and enthrals him with the possibilities that are available in the present.⁵⁰⁷

4.3.3 – Hills and Forests

In exploring the intimate connection between natural spaces and queer mourning and melancholia, Mortimer-Sandilands provides an interesting take on how loss and grief can be discussed vis-à-vis nature. In the context of the AIDS epidemic and a couple of literary texts on it, she highlights how, in the literary representation of death and remembrance in relation to gay men, “[m]elancholia is not a failed or inadequate mourning” but a “form of socially located embodied memory in which the loss of the beloved constitutes the self.”⁵⁰⁸ *Seahorse*

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁵⁰⁵ See Ibid., 249.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 253.

⁵⁰⁷ See Mehrotra, *Guy*, 16 & 19.

⁵⁰⁸ Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures,” 333.

provides a similar, but contextually different, re-presentation of romantic grief embedded in spaces of remembrance.

For example, Nehemiah's love-interest from his past – Lenny – is introduced through the memory of their shared past in the natural spaces in the hills of India's North-East. The connotations that the spatial tangibility of nature and the rural play an important role in constructing Nehemiah's idea of love for another boy at an early age – something that he recollects and returns to all the time in his adulthood, especially in the context of his complicated relationship with Nicholas. In his recollections of the time spent with Lenny, Nehemiah highlights how natural elements like the falling pine needles, the tree roots, the soil and the stones and the inhabitants of such spaces like the long-tailed blue jays, the playful sparrows, the black ants and the yellow butterflies all merged with his presence alongside Lenny in that space as if they were together “woven [...] into the fabric of a spring afternoon” in the woods.⁵⁰⁹

This reminds me of Gaston Bachelard's attempt at unearthing the ‘poetics of space’ in the ‘immensity of the forest’ that presents itself as an endless world of limitless possibilities⁵¹⁰ and ‘intimate immensity’;⁵¹¹ the memorialising of interactions and affections that may not be considered ‘natural’ in the human world can be, and is often, depicted in its very ‘natural’ location in forests and their immensity (and also intensity, if I may add). They are always repositories of the ‘immense’ histories of desires, though being prosecuted in the non-natural realm – a slice of which is narrativised in *Seahorse*. When Nehemiah fondly recalls the days in the past, in the context of his love for Lenny, he makes a telling confession about the all-permissive space of the forest: “Often, I feel I haven't truly left the forest. That

⁵⁰⁹ Pariat, *Seahorse*, 16–17.

⁵¹⁰ See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 185.

⁵¹¹ See *Ibid.*, 193–194 for Bachelard's discussion on the intimate nature of the notion of immensity in the context of the poetic works of Charles Baudelaire.

I'm still there. Astray on an endless evening. Stumbling around in the darkness, looking for a clearing, where anything is possible."⁵¹² As he recalls Lenny's depiction of his torturous time in a psychiatric institution where he was sent by his parents for curing him of his homosexuality, Nehemiah voices Lenny's desires "to be beneath [the trees], to curl his hand into the earth"⁵¹³ – the space of the forest and the feeling of its soil become evocative metaphors for Lenny's love for Mihir and his sexual desiring for the beloved respectively.

Though the past associated with Lenny and located in and memorialised by the intimacy of/through nature, its spaces, and its metaphors is lost to Nehemiah after he has shifted to the metropolis, the remembering and mourning effectivises psycho-spatial recognition and recuperative overcoming of loss – of both love and/in nature. Mortimer-Sandilands' discussion, via Sigmund Freud, on 'melancholy natures' claims that in the contemporary capitalist modernity, there are ample examples of environmental loss, but very few places (or spaces) where the experience of it as loss could help make us realise that the "diminishment of life that surrounds us on a daily basis is something to be really sad about on a personal level."⁵¹⁴ Nehemiah's association of the loss of his love for Lenny, by virtue of him being deemed 'unnatural' and his eventual suicide, pairs up with his loss of the hills and forests of North East India's rich natural locale, providing for a personal literary space for remembrance and mourning towards a similar rethinking of love and loss intimately linked with space. In this context, however, the 'queer melancholia' invested in *Seahorse* becomes "not so much a 'failed' mourning" but "is pressed into the service of memory" and transforms itself into "a preservation of both the beloved and the fact of love itself in the face of a culture that barely allows, let alone recognizes, intimate queer attachments."⁵¹⁵

⁵¹² Pariat, *Seahorse*, 41–42.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹⁴ Mortimer-Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures," 338.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 339.

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In an interview about *Our Impossible Love*, Datta replies to a question about his inclusion of the same-sex love plot in the novel by claiming that “[r]omance fiction in India is not conventional at all; the grey area of romance is what Indian romance is all about.”⁵¹⁶ The ‘grey’ space of literary production that this dissertation has theorised and elaborated upon is actually one of multiple colours. The literary field of queer cultural production, as explicated in the discussion on Datta’s text, not only reveals a queer ‘habitus’ but also relates to the transforming ideas of writing romance in contemporary India.

The contexts of romantic and erotic love, as depicted in literature, needs revision vis-à-vis the developing genre of ‘gay romance,’ an attempt towards which has been made in this study. Furthermore, the argument that there is multivalence in the sexual modernities in India can provide for a critical point of entry into analysing and problematising socio-cultural discourses on the non-heteronorm. In this context, issues of space and spatiality emerge as elements that can assist in locating, reading, and discoursing on the ‘queer’-ness in socio-sexual terms. As such, geographies of sexualities and cartographies of same-sex desires – such as those concerning the city, the home, the rural and natural, the virtual, the manipulated, and the memorial – can help delve into the politics and praxis of re-presentation in literature. So crucial is the relation between gay romance and spaces of romance that the title of one of Rao’s novels – ‘Hostel Room 131’ – and that of Joseph’s novel – ‘Saraswati Park’ – embody, typify, and symbolise the materiality of the romance plot as located in the spaces of romance.

⁵¹⁶ Parshathy J. Nath, “The Many Shades of Love,” *The Hindu*, Nov 28, 2016.

This dissertation has contributed towards an analysis of the uncharted world of literature of/on queer romance in India. Through its focus on addressing and filling up the gaps in on-going academic research related to the fields of queer literature and studies in India, it has reflected upon this emerging body of queer romance literature that voices the contemporary politics of LGBTQ+ issues in India vis-à-vis the experiences and narratives of ‘other-ed’ love stories. Specifically, it has contributed towards enriching the growing academic pursuits related to ‘queer spaces’ and their politics, towards understanding contemporary queer cultures. As such, it has opened up a crucial platform for academic discussions on the multivalent idea of ‘gay romance’ vis-à-vis space, and therefore, I hope that it will also provide a reference point for and encourage further ventures towards socio-literary understandings of LGBTQ+ issues in India which has immense scope and entails timely relevance and requirement. Some of the issues and possibilities that future research can focus on with respect to ‘Gay Romance’ fiction in India (though not restricted to) are as follows:

- idioms and language (e.g., idea of ‘queer’ doubleness via Akhil Katyal)
- forms (e.g. use of the epistolary, confessional, etc. in the novel)
- references (e.g., cultural, mythical, popular, trans-literary, inter-textual)
- inclusive politics vis-à-vis trans/hijra/etc.
- constructs of ‘queer’-ness (e.g., bisexuality, ‘circumstantial homosexuality,’ etc.)
- pederasty and intimate relations between the teacher and the student
- representations of ‘queer’ relations vis-à-vis women (e.g., extramarital, etc.)
- queer kinship / queer family
- intersectionality vis-à-vis religion, caste, class, age, ethnicity, etc.
- Young Adult romance

APPENDIX A: SYNOPSES OF PRIMARY TEXTS

1. R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2003)

Rao's debut novel is considered as one of the earliest examples of 'queer' writing in English in post-colonial India which deals exclusively with homosexuality openly for the first time, portraying the lives of sexually queer characters situated in the rapidly transforming Indian metropolitan space of the 1990s. It depicts the relationship between Yudi – an upper-class, English-speaking, urban-educated, Brahmin, openly gay journalist in his forties – and Milind – a nineteen-year old, working-class, half-literate, closeted, bisexual Dalit. Yudi and Milind make use of various gay cruising spots in Bombay in search of same-sex encounters, construct a 'home' for each other as a 'queer' couple, and explore 'natural' spaces of pilgrimage for their relationship. These spatial negotiations are important issues in terms of the access and use of liminal/marginal 'queer'-ed spaces in the urban landscape and in travels in nature. The novel also narrates sexual and personal turbulences – Milind's joining a male escort service and his marrying a woman despite his desires for men. It presents several instances of intersections of class, caste, religion, and sexuality in the context of multiply marginalised socio-cultural identities, especially in relation to 'gay romance' and also portrays the ways in which the characters navigate and negotiate through the issues to sustain their relationship.

2. R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131* (2010)

Portraying a Bollywood-ish romance between two engineering students, Rao's second novel, set in Pune in the 1970s-80s, is a text located in the proliferating genre of college love stories but something that contemporary college romance fiction completely ignores. While

depicting the romance between two young men at college, the narrative, however, does not provide a typical fiction of romance. Siddharth and Sudhir struggle as protagonists of a love story strewn with obstacles that they must negotiate with and overcome: resistance from a homophobic group established solely for the purpose of defeating their love and hateful opposition and actions from the family. However, there is also strategic negotiation of spaces: loving in the space of the boys' hostel, travelling for the sake of love, a 'queer' union made possible by Sudhir 'trans'-forming into a woman, and their emigration to the US for a new beginning in life. The clash among such aspects, however, is presented with much entertainment, humour, and eventual reconciliation, bringing to the fore an attempt at normalizing 'gay romance' in a manner through which heteronormative love fiction has sustained itself. Due to its subversive agency vis-à-vis the genre of the college romance and socio-political underpinnings, the text is crucial towards analysing gay youth romance fiction.

3. Anjali Joseph's *Saraswati Park* (2010)

Joseph's debut novel presents the life of young Ashish – a new entrant in a quite suburb in Bombay – and his exploration of the suburban possibilities and peculiarities. Ashish develops infatuation for and partakes in sexual interactions with a closeted college-mate named Sunder, but their relationship ends due to Sunder's disagreement over revealing their sexuality. The narrative also portrays the sexual and romantic affair that he develops with an older man and private tutor named Narayan, but this relationship too fails due to Narayan's unwillingness to sustain a serious relationship. The novel presents the trope of the displaced gay subject in the city space who discovers potential for gay romance but must negotiate with a plethora of socio-cultural and personal concerns. While depicting the various odds that Ashish has to face to sustain his romantic relationships, the narrative presents an insight into the lives of ordinary, middle-class young gay men struggling to come to terms with a

possibility of romance located in the semi-urban spatial context. Juxtaposing the heterosexual marital relationship of Ashish's uncle Mohan and his wife with the love relationship of the young men within the same, but parallel, narrative, the novel constructs a literary romance setting that can at once be commonplace and/but is also rarely dealt with in contemporary Indian literature in English.

4. Mayur Patel's *Vivek and I* (2010)

Patel's debut novel portrays the romantic and homoerotic desires of a gay man named Kaushik from Baroda who arrives at a small, remote town called Valai as a school teacher. It presents one of the rare 'gay romance' narratives where the travel/displacement is away from the urban and into the rural. The novel portrays two gay romance plots – while revealing his past sexual and romantic relationship with a young man named Krishna and the subsequent failure of their relationship due to Krishna's inability to come out as gay, the narrative mainly focuses on Kaushik's infatuation, desire, and obsession for his late-teen, heterosexual, tribal student Vivek that transforms into a quest for a romance that, though passionate, is impossible. Apart from the element of the alterative spatial setting of 'gay romance' in the 'rural,' the novel also depicts the agency of travelling to nature specifically for the sake of love. Despite Kaushik not explicitly declaring his love to Vivek, Kaushik having fleeting feelings for a woman, Vivek marrying a girl, and Kaushik eventually becoming an ascetic, in its descriptive insights into the realities of desiring, loving, and intimate bonding between the young men, the novel stands as key text for interrogating the complexities of gay romance.

5. Arun Mirchandani's *You Are Not Alone* (2010)

Mirchandani's debut novella attempts at addressing the complexities in the life of an ageing gay man living in Bombay in the late 1990s. The protagonist and narrator is Sanjay – a 75 year old man who is openly gay and who on his death bed, narrates major events of his growing up, coming of age, falling in love, negotiating problems, and ageing as a gay man in India. From his desires for boys and suffering at the hands of bullies at school to his homoerotic interactions and 'sexcapades' with men in his twenties, the narrative catalogues and recalls Sanjay's same-sex relationships as he ages. Sanjay's sustained gay romance and marital relationship with Ritwik portrays the possibilities of a same-sex relationship in the urban setting – with the focus on the strategic use of both private and public spaces – and its retelling through a queer 'remembering' of same-sex desires, erotic intimacies, and gay romance. Though their relationship ends on a tragic note with the death of Ritwik in an accident, the narrative concludes on a note of positivity that depicts same-sex desires and gay romance as crucially constitutive of Sanjay's not feeling alone in his living, and thriving, as a gay man in India.

6. Janice Pariat's *Seahorse* (2014)

Similar to the narrative of the cross-age gay romance in *Vivek and I*, Pariat's debut novel presents a young student and his desires for and intimacy and relationship with a professor. Partly located in Delhi, the narrative is unique in its portrayal of same-sex romance and relations concerning a young bisexual boy – Nehemiah – who hails from North East India and is multiply displaced by virtue of educational ventures, socio-cultural and linguistic identifications, and movements within and outside India. The narrative is also different in its depiction of an inter-racial and inter-national romantic and erotic affair between two bisexual

men – Nehemiah and Nicholas’ ‘gay affair,’ relating to the ‘erastes-eromenos’ trope, is sensually narrativised as a retelling of the myth of Poseidon and his youthful male devotee Pelops. Within the narrative is represented the complex relations of the protagonists with each other and with the spaces they inhabit – from a reclusive bungalow and a desolate monument in Delhi to rented apartments and the seashores of England. Depicting love, loss, and longing, Pariat’s first-person narrative lets the reader delve into the same-sex desiring and the turbulent, but eventually positive, ‘gay romance’ between two bisexual man separated by spatial and temporal locales but brought together by the possibility of same-sex love.

7. R. Raj Rao’s *Lady Lolita’s Lover* (2015)

In *Lady Lolita’s Lover*, the ‘queer’ representation of gay romance reflects upon a politics similar to, and yet differentiated from, that of *The Boyfriend*. Rao’s third novel narrates the ‘queer’ lives of a working class, bisexual Dalit late-teen named Sandesh – who arrives in Bombay from the countryside for work – and an upper class, gay, middle-aged lawyer named Jeevan in Mumbai. Following the failure of Sandesh’s adulterous romantic-sexual relationship with a married woman named Lolita, his eventual same-sex coupledness with Jeevan is depicted as fallout – the former’s failure to retain the spirit of heterosexual love and the latter’s desire for the young and sexually ambiguous beloved. The ‘gay plot’ of the novel begins in the middle of the novel where the entry of the lawyer and his multifarious support for the aggrieved Sandesh weaves a parallel narrative of same-sex love and a world of cross-class, cross-age gay romance constructed through complex negotiations. In the context of the idea of ‘gay romance,’ three key strands of relational negotiations are of importance: the construction of Sandesh’s queer identity by Jeevan, the sustenance of it through same-sex intimacy between the duo, and the ‘natural’ space-informed possibility/reality of an alternative form of ‘queer’ relationship between the two men.

8. Sahil Sood's *A Thousand Dreams Within Me Softly Burn* (2016)

Sood's debut novella provides curious intermixing of genres and intermingling of narrations and narratives. The narration converges the story of a quest and of the past – of 'gay romance' discovered and re-presented through meta-literary ventures. Shifting the locale to the 'natural' setting, the text also shifts the way 'gay romance' is written; the narrative traverses spatial and temporal locations and re-constructs the love story of Siddharth – a gay man who has left the city and sought isolation and solace in the hills of Shimla. The multi-level narration style reveals the love life of Siddharth by making him write a story about his own 'gay romance;' Siddharth's manuscript portrays the life of his gay character named Saaranish (a meta-fictive Siddharth) and of his sexual-romantic affair with a young man named Akshay, in the cities of Chandigarh and Delhi, and its eventual failure. In the parallel narrative, Siddharth's letters to his beloved testify and narrativise the same-sex amorous relations of the past. In terms of the spatial negotiations of Saaranish and Akshay in the cities, Siddharth's choice to relocate to the hills, and the narrative complexities concerning fiction and reality portrayed within the space of the writing, Sood provides a curious example of an alternative way of writing 'gay romance.'

9. Vicky Arora's *Terminal Love: A Gutsy Gay Love Story from the Pulsating Heart of Mumbai* (2016)

In his debut novella, Arora portrays the lives of two gay men separated by class, age, religion, and ethnicity in the city of Mumbai who traverse the various spaces of same-sex desires and intimacies, who meet each other in a chance encounter, and who find themselves gradually falling in love with each other. The romance between the middle-aged, Marathi, openly-gay man named Vikram and the young, Afghanistani-origin, closeted gay man named Sultan

makes use of Mumbai's various queer spaces, ranging from exclusive pubs and open promenades to private rooms, to partake in intimacy, desiring, and romance. Though their relationship goes through problems including the marriage of Sultan to a woman and his eventual death due to AIDS-related complications, the novella depicts the intense romantic and erotic relationship between the two men who are polar opposites except for their love for the same sex. Providing slices of the spatial and intersectional negotiations in terms of sustaining their love for each other in the fast-paced city, the text allows for an interrogation into lives that are, more often than not, unseen in fictive romance narratives.

10. Akash Mehrotra's *The Other Guy* (2017)

In his debut novel, Mehrotra portrays the lives of two young gay men – Anuj and Nikhil – and their desires, passion, and love for each other. Located in the spatial context of the college hostel, like *Hostel Room 131*, it depicts the various complexities that the two men have to negotiate through in order to sustain their love affair. Intermittently recalling Anuj's past infatuations and failed relationships with boys, the narrative focuses mainly on him falling in love with a fellow student at college – Nikhil. From the various private and public spatial navigation of desire, passion, and intimacy in the campus to sharing of their own 'home' later on in life, from exploring spaces of love in the city of Delhi to a partaking in each other's philosophies, aspirations, and apprehensions about love, the novel presents 'gay romance' in all its erotic and emotional sensuality. The novel's conclusion in the two men finding a lesbian couple to enter in a conditional marriage, where they can sustain same-sex love in secrecy behind a façade of cross-sex marriage, is a key element of the 'queer' narrative's reflection on contemporary Indian society and a commentary on the reality of living dual lives under the shadow of Section 377.

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