

# FROM TOP-BOTTOM TO *KOTHI-PANTHI*: SITUATING THE ACTIVE-PASSIVE DICHOTOMY IN MODERN INDIAN CULTURAL MILIEU THROUGH A SELECT STUDY OF R RAJ RAO'S *GAY PROTAGONISTS*

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*Abstract: The nationalist rhetoric of post-colonial 21st-century India is primarily heteronormative. Within this paradigm, homosexual and queer identities dismantle the rigid notions of what constitutes being a 'man' and 'woman' and also engage in desires that threaten heterosexuality. The objective of the article is to critically examine the "active, passive dichotomy" in gay sexuality in the Indian cultural milieu and the consequences of such a gendered dichotomy within the psyche of the gay man and his relationship with his partner. In doing so, the objective is to situate the Western theoretical frameworks of the top, bottom, and versatile sexual roles in anal sex between gay men to the kothi/panthi binary in the Indian urban-cultural milieu in terms of both language and cultural implications. The methodology employed is content analysis through the theoretical frameworks of Indian gender critics and activists Reddy (2007), Khanna (2007) and Kavi (2007). The primary texts of the study are R Raj Rao's seminal novel *The Boyfriend* (2003) and his short story "Manikarnika Ghat" (2008). The study finds in its analysis that Indian gay identities are themselves enmeshed within the heterosexist kothi-panthi paradigm, often without them realizing so.*

## Introduction: Rationale and Purpose of the Study

The patriarchal rhetoric of sex in the socio-cultural space of the Indian nation is divided into two categories: natural and unnatural sexual desire/intercourse. Gender critic and author Ruth Vanita (2001), in the preface to her seminal work *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History*, enlightens that only in the later 19th century that psychologists across Europe and America divided the society based on sexuality, i.e., homosexuality and heterosexuality (Vanita, 2001). Previous to that, across both the West and India, same-sex desires have existed without any social taboo. Vanita draws from pre-colonial Indian oral and written narratives like *Kamasutra*, medieval Urdu poetry, Rekhti Literature, Puranic, and Katha literature to exemplify the existence of same-sex love and desire in India. It challenges the postcolonial national rhetoric of the present nation-state that same-sex desire and queer sexualities are an import—Muslim invaders, English colonizers, and American capitalists (Vanita, 2001).

Today, the nationalist rhetoric of post-colonial India is primarily heteronormative. Heteronormativity as heterosexual culture in India considers itself a primary form of human (inter-gender) connections and an indivisible means through which reproduction and, therefore, society exists. Within this paradigm, homosexual and queer identities dismantle the rigid notions of what constitutes being a 'man' and 'woman' and also engage in desires that threaten heterosexuality (Narain and Bhan, 2005).

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Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, up until 2018, held that anal sex is unnatural because natural sex was legally and culturally viewed as one that led to furthering of lineage. Narrain and Bhan (2005), in *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, argue how the realities of Section 377 are felt beyond the courtroom; it permeates in the family, workplace, medical establishment, media, and state (Narrain and Bhan, 2005). The bodies of the homosexual and queer community become a geography of dissent, subversion, and violence in their sexual acts and desires. Therefore, there is a complex and layered relationship between the sexual identities of gay subjects in India and their sexual roles and behaviors in how the gay men of India feel compelled to understand and define their social and cultural selves directly to their sexual roles and conduct.

The objective of the present study is to critically analyze the different sexual roles and positions that yield different dominant understandings and consequent identities of gay men in India. In simpler terms, the critical engagement with the interrelation between the sexual roles adopted by gay identities and their construction of the 'self' in a largely heteronormative Indian nation space. The paper briefly explores what masculinity means and how it is at loggerheads with gay sexuality. It does so through the concept of the "active-passive dichotomy" in gay sexuality in the Indian cultural milieu. It then goes on to study the consequences of such a gendered dichotomy within the psyche of the gay man and his relationship with his partner.

The study is divided into two parts: the first part examines the Indian critical theories of the active-passive dichotomy, the varying language and cultural implications of otherwise generic and uniform 'gay' identity in an urban social space, the colloquial terms for these sub-identities against a coherent gay identity through sex object choice as a marker of the identity of men who have sex with men in India. The attempt is to situate the Western theoretical frameworks of the top, bottom, and versatile sexual roles (Ravenhill and De Visser, 2017) in anal sex between gay men to the kothi/panthi binary in Indian urban culture (Reddy, 2007; Khanna, 2007; Kavi, 2007) in terms of both language and cultural implications. The active, passive dichotomy finds manifestation in several critical frameworks, namely the exploration of the top-bottom and versatile sexual roles by James P. Ravenhill and Richard O. De Visser (2017), the exploration of dominant-submissive sexual desires in sadism/machismo by Mark Blasius (1994) Gayle Rubin (1994) and Eric Oifer (2001). The Indian counterpart to this dynamic is studied through the insertive/receptive dynamic in *kothis* and *panthis* by Akshay Khanna (2007), Ashok Row Kavi (2007), and Gayatri Reddy (2007).

The gay sub-culture is pervaded with binaries of kothi/panthi, active/passive, MSM (men who have sex with men)/gay. Gender critic Author Kuhu Sharma Chanana (2015) in *LGBTQ Identities in Select Modern Indian Literature* states that this binary of the oppressor and oppressed in gay identities results in producing polyvalent and unequal power structures (Chanana, 2015). Through the literary study of the critical theories incorporated and the primary texts selected, the second part of the paper further examines the rhetoric of homophobia and its adverse effects on the social and psychological growth of homosexual people. It leads to self-hate, shame, living in secrecy, traumatic methods of curing themselves, forced marriage or suicide, and even murder. The paper's rationale is that the erotics of gay sex, its rhetoric, and cultural implications can be a useful tool to foreground how Indian gay identities are themselves enmeshed within the heterosexist paradigm, often without them realizing so.

The texts taken up by the study are select works of R Raj Rao. Rao is an eminent gay writer, critic, and leading gay rights activist. He has written a collection of short stories, *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City* (2001) and *Crocodile Tears* (2008), a collection of poems titled *Slide Show*, and several plays in *The Wisest Fool on Earth and Other Plays* (2000). The study of the paper's objective is attempted through his seminal novel *The Boyfriend* (2003) (also considered his first novel) and his short story "Manikarnika Ghat" from his collection of short stories *Crocodile Tears* (2008). The *Boyfriend* is a same-sex love story between Yudi, an older urban upper-class man, and Milind, a working-class illiterate boy in his twenties. The gender binary is dismantled in their sex, mock marriage, and love. At the same time, new heterosexual dynamics find impetus in Milind's increased insecurity with the passive role in sex and gender role of a woman in dating a man and being gay. Milind's journey is increasingly riddled with self-hate and hatred towards Yudi, leading him to prostitution. On the contrary, "Manikarnika Ghat" is a murder mystery around the death of a young gay man, Yogesh, who is discovered to be killed by his gay lover, Pankaj, because Yogesh, unprompted, switched from a passive to an active role in sex one day and entered Pankaj from behind instead of allowing him to be receptive. It destroyed Pankaj's manhood, leading him to murder Yogesh.

The texts studied help bring to light the disparate sexual identities that constitute the homosexual subculture in modern India. The texts discuss the complexity of the active-passive dichotomy of gay sex in its incorporation of patriarchal standards of masculinity and heterosexuality and the extent to which it impacts gay identity. They dismantle the gender and sexuality binary and also unwittingly imbibe the heterosexual paradigm. The texts selected depict the resultant attitudes towards same-sex desire, ranging from love and intimacy to hostility, shame, and violence.

## II. Contextualising the Polyvalent Gay Identities in the (Urban) Indian Cultural Milieu

Gender critic Suparna Bhaskaran maintains that increased globalization has resulted in transnational flows of ideas about bodies and that increased communication systems have resulted in Western identity politics and discourses (Bhaskaran, 2008). The queer and gay rights movement in India shifted homosexual identities from invisibility to visibility in the public sphere. It transitioned from a psychological disorder and shameful Western influence to social and political subjects.

Queer critic Gayatri Reddy credits two events in the social realm of the Indian nation that transpired this; first, the publication and popularity of the first gay magazine of India, *Bombay Dost*, and the coming out of its chief editor Ashok Row Kavi and second, the advent of globalization in the late 1990s that flooded the landscape of Indian media with transnational western images, movies, TV series, news, etc. of the sexuality spectrum. Hence arose the large numbers of gay persons and allies vital to campaigns and movements of social-political reform and reclaiming the subjectivity of the queer community.

It is metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore that have primarily spawned the foundational organizations of queer movements. Shah states that the advent of the present times LGBTQIKHP movements started in the late 20th century via disparate attempts like social meetings and parties advertised by word of mouth and newspaper advertisements. It gained moment through other informal networks between people of the

queer community who were in touch with each other through organizations and social groups in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, or Bangalore. The infrastructure of the movements and rallies also took place in urban cities where self-identified gay, lesbian, and queer people connected in “Andersonian ways of gay magazines, newspaper reports of same-sex couples deciding to marry or commit suicide” (Shah, 2014, 642-43). Movements such as pride parades and slut marches became a striking feature of the collective identity, emphasizing the glocal gay.

Many other queer critics alongside Reddy, who acknowledge the influence of the global gay image, also point out how the Western gay image is not isomorphous with the urban gay identity in India. Activist Anjali Gopalan demystifies the identity of “gay” as a classist. She argues that the gay identity is a luxury that does not exist beyond the upper-class, educated English-speaking urbanite. The majority of Indian men sleeping with men do not self-identify as gay. Gopalan states how she asked an MSM when she asked him if he was gay, and he answered he was a man and not a “*chakka*” (derogatory slang for gay men) (Bhaskaran, 2008, 100).

These socio-political changes were catering to an urban gay identity, in essence, a gay man living in the city who would have access to the above-mentioned Andersonian tools like the internet, television, global media, etc. Therefore, it is primarily the cityscape of India in particular that has been important in proving the existence of LGBTQIA+ and drawing them out as a collective identity. (Shah, 2014) Consequently, this has also brought the importance of class and caste as equally important markers in the identity formation of the queer. Therefore, while the emerging glocal urban rhetoric of the Gay community essentializes a categorization of one’s experiences in the umbrella terms of “gay,” there might be sections of the gay subpopulation that identify themselves in other ways and, indeed, not find themselves fitting those sub-categories. In other words, as queer critic Akshay Khanna states in “Us Sexuality Types,” resistance always manifests itself as slippage between the two (Khanna, 2007). Author Parmesh Shahani, in *Gay Bombay*, protests against the same concept of a gay “community,” which he likens to the Andersonian concept of Imagined community in nationalist rhetoric. Apropos, “... it’s important to address yourself as a community and in the very process of calling yourself a community, a community gets formed” (Shahani, 2008, 233).

The term MSM (men who have sex with men) rose to prominence around the 1990s when it was understood that there exists a heterogeneous constellation of identities under it. Ruth Vanita accredits its entry in India to the AIDS movement (Vanita, 2001). James P. Ravenhill and Richard O. De. Visser, in their research article titled “It Takes a Man to Put Me on the Bottom: Gay Men’s Experiences of Masculinity and Anal Intercourse,” demonstrate that in anal intercourse between gay men, there are three roles. The two most common are the ‘tops’ or those typically insertive, and the “bottoms” or the ones typically receptive. The third and rarer of the three is ‘versatile,’ men who are comfortable switching between top and bottom roles in intercourse (Ravenhill and Visser, 2017).

In the Indian counterpart of the term, “*kothis*” are those men who like to be in the receptive position during same-sex encounters. “*Panthis*” are the active partners of the *kothis* in this dynamic; they are also called *narans* as they are defined not merely by the form of their penetrative sexuality but also against the female practices and desires that *kothis* may embody sometimes. It is important to note that there are a range of *kothi* identities, of which hijras are just one. Therefore, not all *kothis* are *hijras* or

transgender or undergo *nirvana* or castration (Reddy, 2001, 95). Ashok Row Kavi states how there exist sub-groups of kothis where there is a crossover, and *kothis* also penetrate other men called *dhoru-kothis* or married effeminate men called *pav-bata-wali-kothis* (Kavi, 392). Apart from *this and panties, there exist many versions of the versatile sexual role called "double-deckers," "glands," "do-paratha,"* and "AC/DC" in the cities of India (Bhaskaran, 2008, 99). Activist Shivananda Khan enlightens us about this fluid and plural homosexuality against the modern understanding of homosexuality as a desire between the same sex, one that's "behavioral" (Bhaskaran, 2008, 100). To summarise, these sexual identities are fluid and flexible.

### III. The Active/Passive Dichotomy in the Various MSM Identities

Patriarchy is founded on a man's control over a woman's body, and if heterosexuality is a desire between a man and a woman, then heterosexual intercourse in a patriarchal society is the authority and dominance of men over women's bodies. Women's entry into the workspace threatened the patriarchal power dynamic between men and women; simultaneously, many genderqueer men who were comfortable with their feminine side and assumed the passive position in sex also emerged in the public space. It resulted in the anxiety of the heterosexual man about what he could become if he shared the public space with women (Valoochhi, 2017).

Feminist critic Tanika Sarkar, in her seminal work *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2005), traces the notions of virility and manliness attached to aggressiveness and dominance as their roots in the relationship between the colonizers and colonized in India. The hyper-masculinity of the white colonizer was contrasted with the servitude, effeminacy, and loss of power of the colonized middle-class man (Sarkar, 2005, 28). Paul Veyne traces a similar analogy of oppressor-oppressed with dominant and subservient sexual roles in Roman master-slave relationships. In his essay titled "Homosexuality in Ancient Rome," Veyne states that the active, passive dichotomy has roots in the ancient Roman slave tradition, where slaves were passive sexual objects to their masters. The sexual dominance of the master was read as synonymous with his social position as well (Chanana, 2015, 135).

Yudi in *The Boyfriend* also foregrounds how the Hindi slang lingo for homosexual intercourse and desire is also ridden with the active and passive dichotomy and the role of the man in the gay sex, terms such as plug-socket, cat-pigeon (Rao, 2003, 30). Heteronormative notions of masculinity as a gender performance in men are a primary reason for this dichotomy in male sexual relations. Anthropologist Matthew Gutmann (1997), in "Trafficking in Me: The Anthropology of Masculinity," describes four essential concepts of "masculinity." Apropos, the first concept of masculinity, holds that it is, by definition, anything men think and do. The second is that masculinity is anything that men think and do to be men. The third is that some men are inherently or by ascription considered 'more manly' than other men. The final manner of approaching masculinity emphasizes the general and central importance of male-female relations so that masculinity is considered anything that women are not (Gutmann, 1997, 386).

Masculinity is a compulsory antithesis of femininity; hence the gender performance of men is governed by impossible and inaccurate standards of strength, virility, penis size, and potency. Yudi states that in the bathroom of Churchgate, Mumbai, graffiti of unusually huge erect penis sizes and testicles are drawn. He comments on how Indians

will always be obsessed with size. Here, size equals virility, which equals manhood. Most importantly, this masculinity is executed in society through the dominance of women's bodies through sexual assertion. The active/passive dichotomy is a false mimicry of this aspect of masculinity. Ravenhill and de Visser, in their discussions, stipulate how tops usually feel more powerful and in control during sex and, therefore, more confident of their masculine identity. In contrast, bottoms feel more vulnerable and submissive during sex. This form of hegemonic masculinity is linked to patriarchal assumptions about attributes of masculinity such as virility, prowess, economic power, and heterosexuality. (Ravenhill and de Visser, 2017). The sexual act becomes reduced to an act of domination, possession of the man's body over the woman's (Bourdieu, 1990).

Row elucidates how sexual behavior marginalizes social groups with the example of the HIV epidemic. The HIV epidemic termed the *kothis*, or men who assumed the passive position in sex, are more at risk than other sub-groups of the homosexual population. This unproven epidemiological deduction, Row argues, originates from the heterosexual paradigm: Women are passive 'receptive' vessels for sperm, and men penetrate them to deposit it. *Kothi* are males whose chief biological characteristic is their 'effeminacy.' Effeminacy is the phenotype of receptive sex. Hence, being effeminate, you are essentially receptive. *Kothis* are passive, effeminate, and hence into receptive sex. Therefore, they are at the most risk in the MSM sector (Kavi, 2007, 394-95).

Akshay Khanna in "Us Sexuality Types" points to the contradictory nature of the rhetoric of HIV; by emphasizing its life-threatening and preventive nature and revolving it around sex, it gives legitimate access to the homosexual body, ascribing norms, and proper behavior (Khanna, 2007). It allows the state to put the onus on receptive men who are swaying away from their actual masculine and heterosexual role, which was an insertive and therefore laying the risk of contracting the disease. Row states that this hypothesis is essential in the hyper-masculine patriarchal state, where it is understood that homosexual behavior cannot be consistent with masculinity. Just like rape and assault on women in India, the unhealthy heterosexist perception of sex carries forward in the gay sexual scenario as well, where one powerful male sexually overpowers another weaker male and proves his merit in a hyper-masculine society (Kavi, 2007). Sometimes, the receptive male also believes in this gender paradigm, and then self-hate, insecurity, and shame start to creep in. In *The Boyfriend* (2003), Rao writes of different sexual roles and desires between MSM in Bombay, India. In the "Swayamvar" section of a gay magazine, there were varied advertisements of men seeking men; one was a submissive slave man seeking a dominant master, while another was a 28-year-old who identified as passive and sought an active partner (Rao, 2003, 85). The theorists of gay sexuality deduce that passivity and powerlessness in sexual intercourse are not a loss of subjectivity but a role play that does not translate to a rigid identity. Hence, gender is not equal to sexuality in gay sex for those who choose to be versatile.

Critic Gayatri Reddy, in her research titled "Crossing 'lines' of subjectivity: The negotiation of sexual identity in Hyderabad, India," mentions the self-identified gay who bases their identities primarily on sexual object choice and does not conform to the *Kothi-panther* or top-bottom binary much like Ravenhill and Visser's mention of the "versatile" gay identity. Reddy quotes one subject, Pramod, who stipulates that *kothis* can be *panthis* on some occasions and vice versa; "...it's not fixed. After all we are all gay" (Reddy, 2001, 97). Reddy demonstrates how sure self-identified gays adhere to versatility and are both active and passive partners. They identify with the umbrella term

of homosexuality or being gay as their primary sexual identity rather than their role in homosexual intercourse. Such men are versatile and switch between active and passive positions in bed. Gay is not a marker of personality or culture for them. Therefore, in this category of gay men, sexuality has replaced gendered practices and norms. They can differentiate between their sexual position (top or bottom) and sexual identity (self-labels). Their sexual role may not always be congruent with their gendered behavior, therefore dismantling the heterosexual binary.

#### IV. The Active/Passive Dichotomy, Heterosexist Masculinity, and Internalised Homophobia in Rao's Oeuvre

The active, passive dichotomy, as discussed above by critics Reddy (2007), Kavi (2007), Ravenhill and De Visser (2017), and others, can be summarised as a heterosexual appropriation of homosexuality in various ways, such as the performance of gender roles, behavior, and acts of intimacy. The cultural conditioning in a heteronormative nation space includes gay identities that, on the one hand, inhabit the heterosexual imperative and, on the other, desire the same sex, a desire they have no control over. In *The Boyfriend*, Rao depicts Milind as suffering from such anxiety, a split identity—the image of what he is supposed to be as dictated by society to the one that is truly his own. In such cases, the internalization of masculinity, i.e., the gender performance of a man as an epitome of virility, strength, and social power, is at war with homosexuality. Effeminacy, being reduced to the gender role of a woman, was to him a sign of weakness and frailty and a subsequent eradication of his masculinity. Milind depicts how beliefs about gender roles and behavior create stereotypes that influence the sexual behavior of gay men and their intimacies. In such cases, it may also lead to internalizing homophobia and inherent self-hatred, as it does with Milind. The only way he can reconcile his patriarchal standard of masculinity with his sexuality is by retaining the active position in sexual intercourse.

Every time Milind had sex with Yudi, he insisted on assuming the top position in sex. Yudi accommodates him even though, during sex, he is not able to penetrate, hinting towards his lack of experience properly. Yudi, on the other hand, who has experience and is versatile in his sexual role, does not probe Milind against either his desire to be a top performer or his lack of performance. Similarly, in “Manikarnika Ghat,” Yogesh and Pankaj have stringently defined roles in bed; Yogesh is the passive partner while Pankaj is the active one. Pankaj describes his insertive role in their sexual relationship as a masculine superiority, “The deal was that I would fuck him and he would pay me” (Rao, 2008, 95).

Yudi is intuitive of this inherent homophobia in gay men, especially ones who are not out of the closet. Whenever he brought strangers home, he would let them take on the active role and let him be passive-receptive. He says that men who are penetrated feel emasculated, like wounded tigers. To compensate for their lost sense of power, they would resort to violence, blackmail, or asking for money. Instead, Yudi argues that when he was passive, they considered him, at best, a hijra (Rao, 2003, 12).

Men who imbibe the heterosexual paradigm of the active, passive dichotomy in their sex with other men project the fear of their own physical and symbolic castration. Therefore, active men often view their passive, receptive partners as hijras. The symbolic castration is synonymous with the symbolic castration of being a woman in sexual intercourse. Often the panthis or ‘top’ men pejoratively call their kothis or passive partners

“*chakkas*” (eunuch). In *The Boyfriend* Milind calls Yudi a *chakka* to insult him (Rao, xx), and Yudi states how he is considered a *hijra* by men who have sex with him (Rao, 2003, 12). Conversely, gay men who consider “bottom” identity as a loss of masculinity may self-name themselves a *chakka* or *hijra* too. In “Manikarnika Ghat,” Pankaj considers himself a *chakka* after being inserted by his partner (Rao, 2008, 95).

It is because sexual power translates directly to social power for men. Sex produces social subjectivity in heterosexuality as the latter otherised women and gay men as sexual objects. They are the antithesis of the heterosexual subjects. Thus, the dichotomy of active/passive also indicates who has control over their subjectivity and who does not. Being economically weaker than Yudi, Milind constantly feels the strain of their economic differences and the agency they wield in a city like Bombay. Chanana stipulates that for a gay man who is also of the lower class, being passive in sex is akin to a eunuch (2015, 134). Therefore, whenever Milind feels overpowered and subjugated in front of Yudi due to his lack of education or money, he consoles himself, thinking he is the active partner, the ‘top’ in the relationship (Chanana, 2015, 134-5).

This polarization is seen seeping over non-sexual roles between them as well. In their mock marriage in *Mate House*, both argue over who the active partner will be, where passivity implies taking on a woman’s role. Milind insists on being the active one as he is also the active partner in sexual intercourse, and thus, Yudi complies and adorns himself with his mother’s chiffon sari. In another instance, when another man propositions Milind, Yudi jumps in to protect him. Watching two men engage in sexual jealousy over him, Milind’s insecurities about his sexual role spill over his realities. He ruminates, “In his scheme of things, men fought over women, not over men. He compared himself to a Hindi film heroine sandwiched between a hero and a villain and felt emasculated” (Rao, 2008, 94).

Gay men who have imbibed the heterosexual paradigm within themselves might adapt their sexual behaviors according to the insertive is equal to masculine and receptive equals feminine dichotomy. Such men will likely self-label and limit themselves to fixed roles (Ravenhill and de Visser, 2). Conversely, the sexual role or position of a gay man may also result in stereotyping his masculinity or its lack thereof. Apropos, “If the top is the man who by hegemonic masculinity has control over women in sexual relations, the bottom must be a woman” (Ravenhill and de Visser, 2017, 5). In “Manikarnika Ghat,” Yogesh is murdered by his active sexual partner, Pankaj. Pankaj states that the reason for killing him was because he violated the carefully marked sexual roles between them. One night, after drinking, Yogesh decided to change his sexual role and became the insertive partner and ejaculated inside Pankaj. Pankaj sees this as an eradication of his manhood, so much so that he isn’t able to get erect after the incident. As Pankaj states to the police officer, “Khatam. My mardangi was destroyed. I stopped getting an erection. I felt like a *chakka*. A randi. Only death could avenge the insult I suffered” (Rao, 2008, 95).

In *The Boyfriend*, the only thing that makes Milind feel secure against his inherent homophobia is being the active partner. Passive is effeminate and condemnable in Milind’s mind. His self-hate also distances him from Yudi, whom he cannot respect. Yudi embraced his sexual role and sexuality without any shame. Chanana explains, “There is a constant rage against their self which finds manifestation in the form of their reflected hatred for their gay partner” (Chanana, 2015, 141). In one of their arguments, Milind is appalled at Yudi’s disrespect towards him when it was Yudi who was a “whore who went down on his knees” (Rao, 127) in sex. This false notion of masculinity seeping into the



active, passive dichotomy is also foregrounded in *A K Modelling agency*. Rao describes the logistics of gay prostitution in the modeling agency. On the whole, penetrators had to pay more than penetrates. As the agency's CEO had a penchant for hunks (rather than queens), he had to put up with the hostility of those who were made to perform 'womanly' acts in bed. A survey showed that most of the boys did not think they were abnormal or perverted as long as they were "active." They could not care less whether what they inserted their organs into was a man's backside or a woman's front side (Rao, 2003, 180).

One of the men Rao interviewed in *Whistling in the Dark* (2009) states how there is constant pressure on gay men to inhabit the "top" sexual role—as to most 'bottom' guys, being bottom challenged their masculinity (Rao, 2009, 80). In *A K Modelling Agency*, the male prostitutes are seen to be divided into two different camps, kothi dorm and panthi dorm, based on their sexual roles and to cater to the specific sexual roles of the clients as well (Rao, 183). This pressure to be a top guy is a manifestation of masculinity and not of inherent desire. Hence, it can be contented that many top guys might be comfortable being at the bottom or even enjoy it if they allow themselves to. A case in point is Pankaj in "Manikarnika Ghat." Pankaj is seen to enjoy the passive position in sex, too. Rao writes how "He sighed ecstatically as Yogesh fucked him. When Yogesh ejaculated into his anus, he even said I love you" (Rao, 2008, 96). It proves that Pankaj is quite capable of sexual satisfaction when it comes to the passive sexual role. Therefore, passivity is not about personal desire for Pankaj. Instead, it is the manifestation of his inherent homophobia and patriarchal definition of masculinity that prohibits him from being a man and, at the same time, being receptive.

In a similar vein, when Milind asks one of his clients, Mr. Contessa, whether he is an active panthi or passive kothi, Contessa remarks that he likes to take the passive position in sex right now, owing to his age. However, when he was younger, he was a panthi (Rao, 2003, 187). This determines fluidity in sexual roles in some gay men who opt for sexual roles as a matter of convenience and comfort. Their sexual roles have no impact on social identities and desires. Similarly, Yudi is also able to switch between his active and passive roles to be versatile as per the demands of his sexual partner. His sexual role does not impact his social identity. Thus, for some gay men like Milind and Pankaj, being gay is indeed a social identity. For others, however, it is just a form of desire, a sexuality that does not impinge on lifestyle or cultural identity, much like Yudi, Mr. Cortessa, and Yogesh. For many others, it is even a driver for their emotional connections and interpersonal relationships (Shahani, 2008, 220), as we see in Yudi's love for Milind.

### Conclusion

Raj Rao calls the anus a "political site" (Rao, 2009); anal sex is an act of political resistance against heteronormativity and the implications of feminization of the male body with its acts of entry. It destabilizes the oppressor and oppressed dichotomy and introduces a foray into polyvalent gay identities and voices under the gay umbrella.

The study concludes that the active, passive dichotomy in gay sexuality and desire is an appropriation of homosexuality by compulsory heterosexuality. In the homophobic rhetoric of heteronormativity, the binary sexual roles of 'top' and 'bottom' stipulates that men who identify as tops or are insertive in anal intercourse are considered more masculine. In contrast, the receptive ones are considered less masculine or feminine (Ravenhill and Visser, 2017). The bottom in being receptive has been reduced to

a woman and, therefore, a loss of social power. Most gay men who have imbibed this patriarchal standard of masculinity consider being at the bottom as a loss of their manhood and the social status equated to that of a transgender person, *a hijra*. Therefore, a sexual role for some men in a heteronormative society translates to social identity.

Homosexual men suffer from anxiety, split between patriarchal society's reductive notions of masculinity and their own bodies and their act of lovemaking. Critics like Kavi (2007) argue that the scorn does not emanate so much from being gay as being passive and receptive and subsequently dismantling the heterosexist masculine ideal.

It throws light on the heterosexist notion of masculinity and its stronghold on the gay community. Therefore, if the Butlerian argument that gender is a performance (Butler, 1998) is to be taken into account and if Beauvoir's proclamation that women are made and not born (Beauvoir, 1949), then proportionately it can be argued that masculinity, too is a performance; it is not so much about being born male but a continuous performance of masculinity throughout life. Psychoanalyst R W Connell evokes Gramsci's concept of hegemony to state that masculinity is not a static object or characteristic. Instead, it implies power relations between genders, the engagement of both genders in a relationship, and their effects on bodily and sexual experiences, personality, and culture (Connell, 1994, 145).

Through the analysis of the texts, the paper finds that the notion of masculinity and the resultant active, passive dichotomy in sexual intercourse between men leads to a rigidity of these roles, breaking of which can often lead to adverse effects on the psyche of the gay man. In "Manikarnika Ghat," we see that the reversal of an active partner to a passive one leads to such shame that an act of grotesque violence and murder is committed. Similarly, in *The Boyfriend*, self-hatred and deprecation leads to loss of love and intimacy. The dire effects are prostitution and eventually forced marriage in an attempt to appropriate homosexuality. In contrast, gay men who can maintain versatile roles are also introduced, like Yogesh, Yudi, and Mr. Cortessa, to depict the possibility of versatile gay sexuality.

Rao (2009) in *Whistling in the Dark* confronts this active-passive dichotomy by stating that MSM who are insistent on being top only to protect their masculinity are not truly gay because homosexuality, the 'gay' identity, resists this binary (Rao, 2009). Therefore, erotic positions of sex challenge gender hierarchy by dismantling the cultural illegitimacy of feminine men and masculine women. It not only provides a scope of masculinity that is not derogatory to women and femininity but also moulds the characteristics of masculinity itself. This new perspective focuses on equality rather than hierarchy in the erotic play of sexual desire when the interrelation of lack and possession is undone.

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