



Reimagining the Past: Queer Historiography in R. Raj Rao's *Mehmud and Ayaz*

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Abstract:

R. Raj Rao's *Mehmud and Ayaz* (2024), a queer reworking of history, is examined in this research paper. Heteronormative historiography is questioned by highlighting the novel's themes of homoerotic Desire, affection and repressed longing. Using queer theory and history writing as tools of critique, the study examines how the novel subverts the prevailing notions of masculinity, power, and sexuality. The novel *Mehmud and Ayaz* as counter history is supported in this study by analysing the text closely as a way of affirming the consciousness of queer and of opposing the denial of non-heteronormative Desire in Indian history.

Keywords: Queer historiography; Homoerotic Desire; Masculinity; Counter-historical narrative; Indian English literature.

Introduction

R. Raj Rao is a seminal figure in Indian English writing. He has also made significant efforts to define the queer subject in Indian social conditions. As one of the first publicly queer authors in India, Rao's literary works disrupt the taboo of discussing sex and the queer subject in the socio-cultural context of the Indian nation, which is dominated by an oppressive morality based on heterosexual norms, patriarchal hegemony, and traditional conservatism. Through his fiction, poetry, non-fiction essays, and interviews, he makes visible the lives of queer men and women in India as a fact of sociality rather than as an aberration or a marginality. His work rejects the notion that queer subjectivity is a Western universal, just as it also resists the Indian refusal even to acknowledge the queer subject. In short, his writing offers the possibility of imagining Indian queer subjectivity in literary language and cultural practices. His novels, like *The Boyfriend* (2003) and *Hostel Room 131* (2010), are well regarded in the Indian literary discourse for their representation of queer Desire and its entanglement with urban space and class. The novel *Mehmud and Ayaz* (2024) is an exceptional text that takes the queer subject away from the contemporary urban sphere and situates it in a historical framework. The novel explores the relationship between the Muslim Turk ruler Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, who is popularly remembered in Indian historical texts for his attacks on Hindu temples and as a hero to Muslim rulers, and in Hindu texts as a villain for his raids, and Ayaz, his slave. The relationship between these two figures is typically understood in terms of religious devotion, moral didacticism or nationalistic narratives. This narrative presents Mahmud and Ayaz's relationship as a queer love story between the Sultan and his loyal slave, in which their bond is characterised by Intimacy and devotion. In so doing, Rao brings forth a queer desire in a space that has been denied the possibility of its existence in Indian historical and literary narratives. In the Indian English queer literary canon, which typically centres the narrative on the postcolonial contemporary experience of queer life in Indian society, *Mehmud and Ayaz* is

the only novel that foregrounds the queer in a past or pre-modern Indian setting. In addition to the fact that the narrative in the book is situated away from the contemporary urban sphere of most other novels in the field, it is important to point out how the novel challenges a notion that is pervasive in Indian cultural, political, and scholarly discourses, which is the idea that homosexuality is an exclusively Western phenomenon that has been introduced to India in the present. By narrating queer Desire and Intimacy through Mahmud and Ayaz, Rao's fictional account challenges the heteronormative logic of the region's historical narrative, thereby making queer Desire possible.

The novel employs a narrative mode that can be described as queer historiography. Queer historiography is defined as the critical practice of asking how history is written and transmitted, how it is institutionalised in different forms of knowledge production and how it can be rewritten to acknowledge the presence of the non-normative, in this case, queer Desire in the past. As the term queer historiography suggests, the primary function of this practice is to question the logic of traditional historiography, which is based on the heterosexual norm of reproduction and lineage as the central axis of the historical narratives. Michel Foucault asserts that "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check" (Foucault 105). According to Foucault, sexuality is historically specific, not a natural, timeless, and eternal essence, and is constructed in relation to specific discourses and practices within a historical framework. In that sense, sexuality must not be understood as fixed or immutable. Rather, there are specific power relations that work at the level of discursive formations through which certain expressions are allowed, while others are excluded. Thus, the history of sexual practices and Desire cannot be thought of as fixed and universal; rather, it is contingent and historical.

Queer historiography seeks to uncover these silences in history through close readings of textual evidence and by critiquing the ways of knowing in historiography. Rather than trying

to "prove" that homosexuals existed by using labels that did not then exist, queer history studies emotions and feelings, bonds of affection, as well as alternative relationship configurations in the past.

Furthermore, *Mehmud and Ayaz* problematise representations of a masculine identity that define themselves through power, dominance, control, and aggression as well as through heterosexual virility. Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance proves useful in analysing this representation. Butler argues that gender identity is "a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler 191), not an essential identity. In *Mehmud and Ayaz*, the representation of masculinity is subverted as Mehmud and Ayaz engage in a series of performative acts that include selfless service, self-denial, subjugation, and emotional openness – particularly as Ayaz continues his devotion and Mehmud becomes emotionally vulnerable towards Ayaz. Their acts of emotional devotion, self-denial, and service problematise a hegemonic definition of masculinity as one that privileges power, domination, and self-interest over all. It also shows how masculinity can be constructed around a set of alternative and contradictory practices, as well as a different form of male selfhood.

Though R. Raj Rao has published many literary works, very few studies exist on R. Raj Rao's queer novels. Studies on the contemporary fiction of R. Raj Rao, such as *The Boyfriend* (2003) and *Hostel Room 131* (2010), focus on how queer identities are negotiated in contemporary India in relation to class and sexuality. The historical context of *Mehmud and Ayaz* has also been largely ignored in existing criticism of R. Raj Rao. Further, the way the novel functions as queer historiography has also been neglected, and the importance of this historical dimension has not been discussed in existing criticisms. For most critics, the story is set in history, and history serves as an allegory for the social context. However, few studies have explored how the novel intervenes in history, makes a queer subject visible, and problematises heteronormative constructions of history. It is particularly important now, when history is being

deployed by conservative forces to impose sexual and cultural norms, as there are efforts to rewrite history to exclude queer subjects.

In the context of the growing body of queer criticism of R. Raj Rao's fiction as well as queer historiography, this study seeks to discuss *Mehmud and Ayaz* as a queering of history. This study aims to read *Mehmud and Ayaz* in light of queer historiography and argue that the novel queer the past by representing queer Desire, emotional bonds and alternative masculinities within the text. The novel becomes a counter-history of queer Desire, sexual Intimacy, and masculinities, and a representation of queer consciousness in history. In addition, the study argues that *Mehmud and Ayaz* expand the boundaries of Indian English queer novels and demonstrate the radical potential of queer historiography to contest cultural and social practices through literature.

Review of Literature

Scholars and critics have frequently noted R. Raj Rao's pioneering role as a key writer in queer Indian literature, one that gives voice to the lived experiences of homosexuality in an India that seeks, both culturally and socially, to repress such identities. However, critical attention to the works has remained somewhat uneven. Most of the scholarly work focuses on his earlier novels, such as *The Boyfriend* (2003) and *Hostel Room 131* (2010), works that have received significant critical engagement for their exploration of queer subjectivity, the culture of urban gay subcultures, and the politics of sex. Scholars like Noopur Jaipal and Vinu George have noted that *The Boyfriend* exposed the marginal status of homosexuals in Indian society, a status where they "face discrimination and are forced to hide their sexual preference" (Jaipal and George), resulting in social isolation from a society where they may also feel isolated from their own identities. Critical responses to *Hostel Room 131* also highlight Rao's examination of the power that the heteronormative gaze has over homosocial relationships between men.

Hasanuzzaman Ansari's analysis demonstrates how the novel depicts the regulatory force of the heteronormative gaze, which "upholds heterosexuality as the normative ideal, marginalising and pathologising non-heteronormative identities" (Ansari 70), in which the homosocial relationship between Siddharth and Sudhir plays out within a hypermasculine institution such as a hostel. Critical responses to both of these works, then, highlight the coded queer sexuality that Rao seeks to represent in his fiction and negotiate for a space within a heteronormative cultural and institutional space.

The critical discussions about Rao's work extend to studies of Indian English novels like his own, which have focused on the significance of his contribution, especially regarding his engagement as a queer activist. In his book, *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture and Politics in India* (2008), the Indian novelist and theorist explores queer lives in a text that attempts to combine lived experience with cultural and political analyses, suggesting how Rao participates in a project of historicising queer identities through literature, culture, and politics. Furthermore, Rao's advocacy for the recognition of queer literature within academia attests to his dual position as both a creative and a critical voice in queer studies in India. More recently, scholarship on Indian queer literature in English has broadened over the past twenty years to address queer literary texts across several dimensions, in literary theory and history, as well as in works that focus specifically on queer identity and narrative conventions. Recent studies of queer Indian literature have generally focused on questions of queer sexuality in relation to culture, representation, and narrative.

Although Rao's novels and theoretical works have been the subject of critical discussion, the current body of criticism suffers from several limitations. For one thing, although scholars have engaged with other major novels in Rao's oeuvre, such as *The Boyfriend* and *Hostel Room 131*, there has been only minimal critical work to date on his novel *Mehmud and Ayaz*. Furthermore, references to *Mehmud and Ayaz* have mostly come through interviews rather than academic

journals. While Rao himself has discussed his novel in interviews, including an interview with Webjosh in which he remarks that his approach to the legendary tale of Mahmud and Ayaz as one that "is not the same as mainstream writing" and must articulate its own aesthetics rather than merely depict same-gender relationships (Rao), these remarks are primarily journalistic, and the novel would benefit from a sustained and critical academic discussion that might treat the novel as a text concerned with queer histories and historiography.

Textual Analysis: *Mehmud and Ayaz*

R. Raj Rao's *Mehmud and Ayaz* is unique as it tells the story of a same-sex relationship that goes against traditional views of Desire, Intimacy, and power. The text is based on Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni and Ayaz, his slave-lover, but Rao sets it in modern India, in the lives of two people who meet and grow close: Mahmud Fakhar and Ayaz. The text stages a closeness that does not fall within the bounds of traditional servitude, nor does it follow typical romantic conventions. The story shows how closeness, bodily restraint, love and power co-exist. The connection between the two starts in a practical sense, as Mahmud employs Ayaz, and then evolves into an intertwined relationship. In the early description of the text, it explains that Ayaz is not necessarily a friend or enslaved person; he is someone who has been bound into the fabric of a new life outside of society's definitions:

"Well, Man Friday is more like it,' Mahmud replied. 'He is a Mahar by birth, but he has converted to Islam'" (Rao 139).

In this passage, Rao deploys language to both define and transcend categorisation. Mahmud's act of renaming Pandurang "Ayaz" in the service of his embrace of the Islamic faith is, on a symbolic level, an act of re-inscribing identity beyond class, caste, gender, and sexual identity. Their relationship immediately emerges as both intimate and politicised, a closeness not simply

physical but one with profound emotional resonance, disrupting established socio-cultural codes.

Queer Rewriting of Memory: From Historical Ideal to Lived Intimacy

The text rewrites historical memory by shifting the focus from idealised historical representation to everyday emotional experience. By this process, queer Intimacy does not remain hidden historical possibility. Through Mahmud Fakhar, Rao renders visible how history, too, is employed psychologically and emotionally as a resource for self-construction in the present day. The fascination with Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni is not an intellectual and aesthetic exercise of appreciation for this historical figure but, rather, a model of relationality in which Mahmud thinks and imagines. It acts upon notions of devotion, authority, and attachment. The constant reference to Ghaznavi in Mahmud is a testament to an emotional, and not only discursive, desire to recall the past, to convert it from narrative into practice of relational Intimacy. This idealisation is witnessed in the act of renaming him Ayaz. "You need a muslim name. So from this very minute, your name is Ayaz. But you may retain your surname. I love your surname: Gang-War" (Rao 91). This is where the memory of the past becomes a process of personal reconstruction, where history and legend, the past and the present, and the ideal and the real are merged.

Nevertheless, Rao is not content to re-narrate the past by copying it. Though the Ghaznavi-Ayaz story is predicated on hierarchical structures and the dynamics of symbolic loyalty, the current Mehmud-Ayaz relationship is predicated on mutual emotional affection and openness. Mahmud Fakhar's status of authority is constantly undermined by his reliance on, need for, the presence of Ayaz as companion and caretaker, emotional stability, and the latter is a type of masculinity that is less about dominating but is constructed through affectivity. In Mehmud and Ayaz, Rao turns the hierarchy of legends into a story of intimate relationship: the former

is a result of the latter and the latter's result of the former, through which memory is re-signified through relational ethics in the present, as Mehmud and Ayaz say, "Hurray, Mehmud says. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni did not marry his Ayaz. But I married mine" (Rao 213). This queering of memory in the novel is made all the more clear through the transformation of loyalty into Intimacy. While loyalty is historically symbolic, in the novel it is embodied and affective: "The copulation itself continued unabated, night after night, without protection, now both men made videos of their lovemaking with their respective smartphones" (Rao 86). In this scene, permanence is achieved through fusion, turning the legend of their physical inseparability into a story about relational ethics, in which the two are fused and inseparable in their relationship. Moreover, Ayaz's silence becomes a means of redefining a relationship that is not based upon hierarchical power structures but upon emotional depth. In this case, Ayaz states, "All due to you, Ayaz said, with tears in his eyes . I was so lucky to run into you that God-given morning" (Rao 270).

In this manner, Rao's novel transforms memory into something queered, in which the past is not reproduced but recreated. The legend of Ghaznavi and Ayaz serves as an archetype for how queer subjectivity can speak about itself in the present, and by which the past is not remembered simply through a lack of historical fidelity, but through affect, Intimacy, and relational ethics.

Emotional Intimacy and the Politics of Desire

Through the reinterpretations of historical narratives, Rao shifts focus from public history to private emotions. It explores Desire as a site of queer resistance. In contrast to numerous queer stories that hinge on definitive sexual acts, Rao prioritises emotional reliance and understated commitment as the defining features of Intimacy. This strategy is consistent with queer theorising's focus on affect, relationality, and the dismantling of conventional boundaries. Often, Rao's language implies these ideas implicitly rather than through overt pornography,

relying instead on implication and emotional resonance rather than display. In this scene from the book, Ayaz kisses Mahmud's mouth passionately and embraces him on the spot upon hearing the news that Mahmud had been confirmed as a doctoral candidate: "Their tongues wrestled while their lips stayed glued as if smeared with Fevicol" (Rao 144). Such a scene renders Desire urgent, physical, and open to the eye but still embedded in daily existence. It is not simply a scene of gratification but one of mutual recognition of themselves and their respective vulnerabilities. The protracted kiss presents this language of the body to draw the reader's attention to the equality of Desire, as opposed to the objectification of the other.

Silence, Restraint, and Loyalty

The text demonstrates that queer Desire is not always expressed openly but often exists through silence, restraints and acts of loyalty. These elements reveal the emotional and social negotiations that shape queer existence within a historical context. The silence and restraint between Mahmud and Ayaz are usually used to denote the unspeakable elements of affection and authority. At times silent and guarded, Ayaz represents a loyalty that is self-styled and relationally negotiated. In Rao's story, Ayaz's loyalty is not represented as passive obedience, but as an expressive restraint; a form of bonding that admits an imbalance but still actively seeks to remain together. If some historians might suggest that an enslaved person's loyalty was forced, Ayaz has opted to share life, identity, and existence with another. One moment shows Ayaz withdrawing to the kitchen amidst domestic strife; it is not a shy action, but rather, a recognition of the violence of a social order, where Mahmud's sisters' treatment of Ayaz hints at caste bias-"He is a Hindu untouchable, Maryam said. He cannot eat with us" (Rao 142)-which intersects with Intimacy. Mahmud's response-"They had no right to call you an untouchable" (Rao 142)-indicates an active rejection of social hierarchies that endanger the stability of their relationship. In Rao's representation, loyalty is not subservience but a negotiated affective decision. Silence, in these moments, serves as a space for introspection,

one in which their commitment is reaffirmed not through grand statements but through their continuous presence and joint protection.

Master–Slave Power Reconfiguration

The reinterpretation of history extends to questioning established power relations. It redefines the dynamics between power, Desire, and agency. The historical master–slave relationship between Sultan Mahmud and Ayaz has been reconceptualised by Rao in his novel as a highly complex and flexible situation that is by no means limited to domination. Conventional historical accounts of master–slave relationships emphasise the themes of authority, extraction, and compliance. Rao complicates this by portraying Mahmud and Ayaz as partners who choose to share a life, one that cannot be easily divided along the axes of power, however skewed they may be. Although Mahmud initiated this bond via socio-economic mechanisms of his choice (employment, religion), the emotional value of their relationship subverted this. The journey between them from Mumbai to Kashmir and back is a project that becomes, in fact, a joint effort toward survival, hope, and contest, in which dominance is negotiated and established daily through care and duty, not through force. In this new perspective on domination, which highlights the subversive potential of queer Intimacy to dismantle established social and political structures, thereby transforming a relationship of status between two people into a continuing relational negotiation of status. For Rao, instead of depicting Ayaz as a victim of domination, Mehmud grants him agency, passion, and emotional independence alongside Mehmud, as in *Mehmud and Ayaz*, “But you called me slave, Pandu reminded him. So what? I will kiss the feet of my slave. And his dick too, Mehmud said, kissing Pandu on the cheeks” (Rao 92).

Queer Vision

The representation of Mehmud and Ayaz in this novel belongs to the overall queer project that runs through Rao's writing. In *The Boyfriend*, Rao emphasises the day-to-day dynamics of queer selfhood in the face of social rules and class differences, especially among young men grappling with love, concealment, and self-awareness. Likewise, in *Hostel Room 131*, Rao shows how institutional settings can shape the ways queer selves are conceived and restricted. While both novels contest overarching and exclusive narratives that marginalise non-heteronormative lives and foreground local and embodied experiences of love, violence, and self-formation, in *Mehmud and Ayaz*, Rao's queer narrative takes this one step further by contextualising same-sex Desire within the past and in relation to feeling, as opposed to the modern era alone. The combination of story and reality – the two stories of Sultan Mahmud and contemporary Mahmud Fakhar – illustrates Rao's sense that sexual and emotional attraction in the queer have always existed, even when it is not recognised by orthodox history. Such a historical sense of continuity not only legitimises queer existence but also opposes dominant accounts that have suppressed and discredited queer sexual lives.

Conclusion

In *Mehmud and Ayaz*, Rao foregrounds the queer historiography of emotional attachment, loyalty, and relationality, queering history and the historical novel. By retrieving the suppressed discourse of queer selves, Rao resists heteronormative historiography and reclaims sexual Desire within the past. *Mehmud and Ayaz* advance the study of queer historiography by proving that sexuality is always historically conditioned—influenced by societal arrangements, social memories, and discourse, not innate biology; shaped by social relationships and affective relations, not simply biology; and performative—enacted by repeated actions and identities,

not innate selves. Future studies could examine how race, caste, and history interact in Rao's fiction and how it parallels other South Asian queer historiographies.

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