



## A Critical Analysis of R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131* on Queer Nostalgia and the Politics of Memory

Gagan Talukdar<sup>1\*</sup>, Amar Kumar Nayak<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Arunachal University of Studies, Namsai

<sup>2</sup>Supervisor, Department of English, Arunachal University of Studies, Namsai

\*Email: [talukdargagan@gmail.com](mailto:talukdargagan@gmail.com)

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.2.239](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.2.239)



### Article info

Article Received: 17/04/2026  
Article Accepted: 21/05/2026  
Published online: 29/05/2026

### Abstract

In the oeuvre of R. Raj Rao, it is discernible that his works are foregrounded with the problems and perplexities of the Queer Community in India. His seminal work, *Hostel Room 131* (2010), delves deep into the varied layers of queer identity in Urban India during 1970s. This novel examines the intersections of memory, nostalgia, and spatial politics. It also examines the traces of emergence of "queer identity" within a sociocultural framework mechanised by severe sexual repression and legal criminalisation. This paper makes an attempt to analyse how the hostel serves as a symbol of Catalyst to examine sprouting up of repressive desire on one hand and how attempts are made to resist the "secret desire" within the given space. An analytical method has been adopted to unleash and study how retrospective narration and "queer nostalgia" serve as tools to reconstruct hidden histories and resist the erasure of queer experiences from cultural memory.

**Key words**-Nostalgia, Memory, Queer, Identity, Culture, Postcolonial.

### Introduction

Indian English Literature has increasingly become a powerful site for the articulation of marginalized identities and silenced experiences. Among the many emerging voices that challenge normative understandings of gender and sexuality, R. Raj Rao occupies a distinctive position because of his fearless representation of queer life within the Indian sociocultural framework. His works do not merely narrate queer experiences; rather, they explore the structures that shape queer

existence in postcolonial India. After the remarkable reception of *The Boyfriend*, Rao continued his literary engagement with queer subjectivity through *Hostel Room 131* (2010), a deeply introspective and emotionally layered novel that revisits queer adolescence in 1970s India.

Unlike *The Boyfriend*, which is situated within the complexities of urban modernity and overt social realities, *Hostel Room 131* functions as a Bildungsroman that traces the protagonist's coming-of-age journey in Pune during a period

marked by political unrest, conservatism, and severe sexual repression. The novel explores the emotional and psychological development of a young queer individual negotiating his identity in a society where homosexuality remains unspeakable, invisible, and criminalized. The titular hostel room becomes both a literal and metaphorical space that contains fear, desire, longing, confusion, and memory. It is within this confined institutional environment that the protagonist begins to understand the complexities of his sexuality.

The significance of *Hostel Room 131* lies not only in its representation of queer desire but also in its exploration of memory and nostalgia as tools for reconstructing hidden histories. Rao's narrative unfolds through retrospection, where the adult narrator revisits fragments of his adolescence with a mixture of tenderness, guilt, longing, and emotional vulnerability. Through this reflective mode, the novel challenges dominant heteronormative histories that erase queer experiences from cultural memory. Rao's writing transforms ordinary moments of intimacy into politically meaningful acts of remembrance.

Furthermore, the novel demonstrates how institutions such as schools and hostels function simultaneously as spaces of surveillance and possibility. The all-male hostile environment, governed by rules and discipline, becomes a paradoxical space where same-sex desire is both suppressed and secretly enacted. This duality allows Rao to expose the contradictions embedded within social institutions that attempt to regulate sexuality while unintentionally producing spaces for resistance and emotional experimentation.

The novel is also important because of its subtle treatment of language and identity. Instead of relying on explicit labels such as "gay" or "queer," Rao constructs a narrative shaped by silence, ambiguity, and emotional suggestion. This absence of direct terminology reflects the sociocultural reality of 1970s India,

where discussions of homosexuality were largely absent from public discourse. The protagonist's inability to clearly articulate his desire becomes symbolic of the larger invisibility imposed upon queer individuals by society.

At the same time, *Hostel Room 131* blurs the boundary between fiction and autobiography. The emotional honesty and realism of the narrative strongly suggest autobiographical influences, allowing the text to function as both literature and testimony. Through storytelling, Rao not only preserves personal memory but also contributes to a larger archive of queer history in India.

This paper seeks to critically analyse *Hostel Room 131* through the theoretical frameworks of queer theory, psychoanalysis, and spatial theory. It examines how the novel portrays the emergence of queer identity within the sociocultural limitations of 1970s India, how memory and nostalgia contribute to queer subjectivity, and how institutional spaces operate as sites of both repression and resistance. The paper also evaluates Rao's contribution to Indian queer literature and the politics of representation through autobiographical fiction.

The primary objectives of this paper are –

1. To examine the ways in which *Hostel Room 131* portrays the emergence of queer identity within the sociocultural limitations of India in the 1970s.
2. To analyse the symbolic role of institutional spaces, particularly the hostel, as locations of repression, surveillance, and covert exploration of desire.
3. To investigate the relationship between memory, nostalgia, and queer subjectivity in the novel.
4. To explore the politics of silence, language, and naming in the representation of queer experience.

5. To evaluate R. Raj Rao's contribution to Indian queer literature through autobiographical fiction and literary activism.

### Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach to literary analysis. The text for the study is R. Raj Rao's novel *Hostel Room 131*. The analysis is conducted through close textual reading, with attention to narrative structure, characterization, symbolism, motifs, and language.

The study draws upon the theoretical perspectives of queer theory, psychoanalytic criticism, and spatial theory. Michel Foucault's ideas regarding institutions, surveillance, and the discourse of sexuality provide a framework for understanding the hostel as a site of discipline and repression. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories on the closet and queer identity are employed to examine silence, secrecy, and emotional conflict within the novel. José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer temporality and queer nostalgia helps in interpreting the novel's retrospective narrative structure and its engagement with memory.

In addition to theoretical analysis, the paper also consults relevant secondary scholarship related to Indian queer studies, autobiographical fiction, postcolonial sexuality, and queer literary representation. By situating the novel within broader cultural and historical contexts, the study aims to understand the political and literary significance of Rao's work.

### Analysis and Discussion

R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131* is not merely a narrative about adolescence or sexual awakening; it is an exploration of how queer identity develops within structures designed to suppress difference. The novel effectively captures the psychological complexity of growing up queer in a society where desire cannot be openly named or acknowledged. Through memory, silence, institutional space,

and emotional ambiguity, Rao constructs a deeply personal yet politically significant account of queer existence.

The hostel itself functions as one of the most important symbols in the novel. On the surface, it appears to be a regulated institutional environment governed by discipline, hierarchy, and surveillance. Students are expected to conform to social norms and behavioural expectations. However, beneath this atmosphere of control lies an undercurrent of hidden intimacy and unspoken desire. The hostel room becomes a liminal space where boundaries between friendship, desire, companionship, and repression blur.

Michel Foucault's theories regarding institutions and sexuality are especially useful in understanding this duality. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that institutions do not merely repress sexuality; they also produce discourses around it. Sexuality becomes regulated through observation, categorization, and silence. Rao's portrayal of the hostel reflects this contradiction. While the institution attempts to enforce discipline and heteronormativity, it simultaneously creates opportunities for emotional and physical closeness among young men.

The protagonist's experiences within the hostel reveal how desire survives even within restrictive conditions. Small gestures such as lingering gazes, accidental touches, shared beds, and moments of vulnerability carry immense emotional significance. These interactions are often marked by hesitation and fear, yet they become foundational experiences in the protagonist's understanding of himself. Rao does not sensationalize queer desire; instead, he portrays it as quiet, uncertain, and deeply human.

The spatial arrangement of the hostel also contributes to the emotional atmosphere of the novel. Confined rooms, narrow corridors, and shared living spaces intensify emotional proximity while simultaneously creating

anxiety regarding exposure and judgment. The hostel room becomes paradoxical in nature. It is both protective and oppressive. It offers temporary privacy while constantly reminding the protagonist of the social dangers associated with his desires.

The educational institution portrayed in the novel also reflects the broader moral anxieties of postcolonial Indian society. Hostels and schools are expected to produce disciplined citizens who conform to accepted standards of masculinity and morality. However, Rao reveals that such institutions can never fully regulate emotional and sexual behaviour. Hidden desires continue to emerge despite surveillance and restriction. In this sense, the novel critiques the illusion of institutional control by exposing the emotional realities concealed beneath structures of discipline.

The idea of liminality is central to understanding the significance of the hostel space. The protagonist occupies a transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood, innocence and awareness, silence and self-recognition. Similarly, the hostel itself exists between public and private life. Within this in-between space, the protagonist begins to confront emotions that society has taught him to suppress.

Another major aspect of the novel is its treatment of memory and nostalgia. The narrative unfolds retrospectively, with the adult narrator revisiting the emotional landscape of his youth. This act of remembering is not straightforward or chronological. Instead, memory appears fragmented, emotional, and deeply subjective. The narrator recalls moments of intimacy and confusion with a sense of longing that suggests both attachment and pain.

José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer temporality becomes particularly relevant in this context. Muñoz suggests that queer experiences often resist conventional narratives of progress and linear development. Queer memory disrupts normative understandings of

time because it is shaped by loss, secrecy, and unrealized desire. In *Hostel Room 131*, the past continuously intrudes upon the present. The narrator's memories are not distant recollections but emotionally active experiences that continue to shape his identity.

The nostalgia present in the novel is neither romantic nor entirely idealized. Instead, it is marked by ambivalence. The narrator remembers his hostel years with affection, but also with shame, fear, and emotional incompleteness. This tension gives the narrative its emotional depth. The past becomes a site of unresolved feelings where moments of intimacy coexist with the trauma of repression.

In many ways, Rao transforms ordinary memories into acts of political resistance. In societies where queer histories are erased or silenced, remembering itself becomes radical. By documenting experiences that mainstream history ignores, the novel creates an alternative archive of queer life. The narrator's memories challenge heteronormative assumptions about adolescence, friendship, and desire.

Memory in *Hostel Room 131* does not merely function as recollection; it also becomes a means of emotional survival. The narrator revisits his past not to achieve closure but to preserve experiences that society attempted to erase or suppress. Through this process, memory acquires political significance because it resists cultural forgetting. The novel suggests that queer individuals often rely upon memory as an alternative archive in the absence of social recognition and historical representation. The act of remembering therefore becomes deeply connected to identity formation and emotional continuity.

The novel also highlights the emotional significance of fleeting moments. Shared conversations, emotional dependency, physical closeness, and subtle acts of care become deeply meaningful because they exist outside socially accepted frameworks of intimacy. Rao's attention to these small details reflects the

realities of queer existence in environments where open expression is impossible.

Another crucial theme in the novel is the politics of the closet. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on the closet helps explain the emotional and psychological dimensions of secrecy within the narrative. The protagonist constantly negotiates the fear of exposure and the desire for emotional connection. His silence is not simply personal hesitation; it is shaped by cultural expectations, institutional control, and social stigma.

In the Indian context of the 1970s, homosexuality was not only socially condemned but legally criminalized under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. This historical reality intensifies the protagonist's internal conflict. He cannot openly articulate his feelings because society offers no safe language or social acceptance for queer identity. The closet therefore becomes both a psychological condition and a social structure.

Unlike many Western coming-out narratives that focus on liberation through self-disclosure, *Hostel Room 131* resists simplistic narratives of identity affirmation. Rao portrays queerness as fragmented, unstable, and relational. The protagonist's identity develops gradually through experiences, emotions, and memories rather than through a single transformative moment.

This refusal to provide a clear or triumphant resolution reflects the realities of queer life in India during the period depicted in the novel. The protagonist's silence is not necessarily weakness; sometimes it functions as a survival strategy. Rao demonstrates how queer individuals often negotiate visibility carefully within hostile environments.

The absence of explicit labels such as "gay" or "queer" throughout much of the novel is equally significant. Language in *Hostel Room 131* is characterized by hesitation, ambiguity, and emotional suggestion. The characters rarely

define their relationships or desires directly. This linguistic restraint mirrors the cultural silence surrounding sexuality in Indian society during the 1970s.

The politics of naming becomes especially important here. Identity labels can provide recognition and solidarity, but they can also impose rigid definitions upon fluid experiences. Rao's refusal to rely heavily on fixed categories allows the emotional complexity of the characters to remain intact. Desire in the novel exists beyond simplistic binaries.

At the same time, this ambiguity also reflects the limitations of applying Western queer frameworks directly to the Indian context. Concepts such as "coming out" or stable sexual identity categories do not always capture the lived realities of queer individuals in societies shaped by different cultural histories and social structures. Rao's narrative therefore contributes to the development of a distinctly Indian articulation of queer experience.

Silence in the novel functions in multiple ways. At times, it reflects fear and repression. At other times, it becomes a mode of emotional communication. Much of the intimacy between characters exists through gestures, pauses, glances, and unspoken understanding rather than direct confession. Rao's restrained prose style effectively captures this emotional subtlety.

Silence within the novel should not always be interpreted as weakness or passivity. In several moments, silence functions as a protective mechanism that enables the protagonist to navigate a hostile social environment without complete emotional collapse. Rao demonstrates that queer existence within conservative societies frequently depends upon coded communication, restraint, and indirect emotional expression. As a result, silence becomes both a burden and a strategy of survival. This complexity prevents the novel

from reducing queer experience to simplistic binaries of oppression and liberation.

The emotional texture of the novel is further strengthened by its autobiographical undertones. Although *Hostel Room 131* is presented as fiction, the narrative carries a strong sense of personal authenticity. The blending of autobiographical memory and fictional reconstruction allows Rao to explore queer history with emotional honesty while maintaining literary complexity.

Autobiographical fiction has often been an important form for marginalized writers because it allows personal experiences to become politically meaningful narratives. In Rao's case, storytelling becomes an act of resistance against historical erasure. By narrating queer adolescence in a conservative society, he preserves experiences that have traditionally been excluded from literary and cultural discourse.

The autobiographical dimension of the novel also contributes to its emotional realism. The narrator's vulnerability, confusion, and longing feel deeply lived rather than merely imagined. Rao does not portray the queer protagonist as heroic or idealized. Instead, he emphasizes emotional contradictions and imperfections, making the narrative more authentic and relatable.

At the same time, Rao's work can be understood as a form of literary activism. Rather than relying on overt political slogans or dramatic declarations, the novel engages in subtle political intervention through representation itself. Simply depicting queer desire with seriousness and humanity challenges the invisibility imposed upon queer individuals by mainstream society.

The novel's historical setting further enhances its political significance. By situating the narrative in pre-liberalization India, Rao documents a period often absent from discussions of Indian queer history.

Contemporary representations of queer identity are frequently shaped by globalization, media visibility, and legal activism. *Hostel Room 131*, however, reminds readers that queer lives existed long before public recognition or legal reform.

This historical perspective is important because it resists the assumption that queerness is a modern or Western import. Rao's portrayal of queer adolescence within a specifically Indian cultural setting demonstrates the long-standing presence of queer experiences in Indian society.

The novel also explores the relationship between masculinity and vulnerability. Traditional notions of masculinity within Indian society often emphasize emotional restraint, heterosexuality, and dominance. The protagonist's emotional sensitivity and longing challenge these expectations. Rao portrays male intimacy in ways that destabilize rigid gender norms.

Friendship in the novel frequently exists on the border between platonic affection and suppressed desire. This ambiguity complicates conventional understandings of male relationships. The emotional intensity between characters reveals how deeply social norms regulate not only sexuality but also expressions of affection and vulnerability among men.

Another notable feature of Rao's narrative is its refusal to separate emotional and physical desire. In many stereotypical portrayals of queer relationships, physical intimacy is either sensationalized or reduced to deviance. Rao instead presents desire as intertwined with loneliness, emotional dependence, companionship, and the search for recognition.

The protagonist's experiences are shaped not only by sexuality but also by shame and self-surveillance. He internalizes the moral expectations of society, leading to emotional conflict and self-doubt. This internalization reflects the psychological impact of living

within heteronormative structures where queer desire is treated as unacceptable.

Even within this atmosphere of repression, the novel is not entirely pessimistic. Moments of intimacy and connection provide emotional relief and temporary liberation. Even brief experiences of affection become meaningful acts of resistance against a society that seeks to erase queer existence.

Rao's prose style plays an important role in conveying the emotional atmosphere of the narrative. The language is restrained yet emotionally rich, allowing silence and implication to carry significant meaning. This subtlety reflects the realities of queer communication within restrictive social environments where direct expression may be dangerous.

The retrospective structure of the narrative also creates a sense of emotional layering. The adult narrator revisits the past with greater awareness, but the memories remain emotionally unresolved. This tension between past and present highlights the lasting impact of formative experiences.

The politics of memory in the novel ultimately extends beyond individual experience. By remembering and narrating queer adolescence, Rao contributes to a collective cultural memory that challenges historical erasure. The novel becomes an archive of emotions, desires, fears, and relationships that dominant histories often ignore.

Through its exploration of space, memory, silence, and identity, *Hostel Room 131* expands the possibilities of Indian queer literature. It demonstrates that queer narratives do not need dramatic declarations or overt activism to be politically powerful. Quiet memories, hidden desires, and emotional vulnerability can themselves become forms of resistance.

Rao's contribution to Indian literature is therefore both artistic and political. He creates

narratives that humanize queer experiences while simultaneously challenging cultural norms and historical silences. His work encourages readers to rethink assumptions about sexuality, identity, masculinity, and belonging.

### Conclusion

R. Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131* stands as a significant contribution to Indian queer literature because of its nuanced exploration of identity, memory, repression, and desire. Through the story of a young queer protagonist navigating the sociocultural realities of 1970s India, Rao exposes the emotional complexities of growing up within a society structured by heteronormativity and silence.

The novel demonstrates how institutional spaces such as hostels function simultaneously as environments of discipline and sites of covert emotional and sexual exploration. By portraying the hostel room as both restrictive and intimate, Rao reveals the contradictions embedded within social institutions that attempt to regulate sexuality.

Memory and nostalgia emerge as central narrative forces within the text. The retrospective structure of the novel allows queer experiences that were once hidden or suppressed to be revisited and preserved. Rao transforms personal remembrance into a political act that resists the erasure of queer histories from cultural memory.

The novel's treatment of silence, language, and naming further deepens its significance. By avoiding rigid identity labels and emphasizing emotional ambiguity, Rao captures the realities of queer existence in a context where homosexuality lacked social visibility and linguistic recognition. His portrayal of queerness resists simplistic narratives of liberation and instead presents identity as fluid, fragmented, and deeply connected to cultural context.

The autobiographical undertones of *Hostel Room 131* also strengthen its literary and political impact. Through the blending of fiction and personal memory, Rao creates a narrative that functions both as artistic expression and historical testimony. His storytelling becomes an act of literary activism that challenges invisibility and validates marginalized experiences.

Another important aspect of the novel is its exploration of emotional isolation. The protagonist frequently experiences loneliness because he lacks a social language through which he can communicate his feelings openly. This emotional isolation intensifies the psychological tension within the narrative and reflects the broader alienation experienced by queer individuals in conservative societies. Yet, despite this loneliness, the novel continually searches for moments of intimacy, recognition, and human connection. Rao therefore balances despair with emotional resilience, making the narrative both painful and deeply compassionate.

Ultimately, *Hostel Room 131* is more than a coming-of-age narrative. It is a literary archive of queer memory, longing, vulnerability, and survival. Rao's work reminds readers that queer histories have always existed, even when society refused to acknowledge them. By giving voice to experiences shaped by silence and repression, the novel creates space for empathy, recognition and critical reflection.

In contemporary discussions of Indian queer literature, *Hostel Room 131* remains important because it foregrounds the emotional and psychological dimensions of queer life rather than reducing identity to political slogans or stereotypes. The novel preserves hidden histories while opening new possibilities for understanding sexuality, memory, and human connection in Indian literature.

The novel also remains relevant in contemporary times because it encourages readers to reconsider the relationship between

sexuality, memory, and cultural history. Even after significant legal and social changes regarding queer rights in India, many forms of silence and stigma continue to exist. Rao's work therefore continues to resonate with modern readers by reminding them that queer experiences cannot be separated from questions of belonging, visibility, and emotional recognition.

## References

- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: Volume I* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. New York University Press.
- Rao, R. R. (2010). *Hostel Room 131*. Penguin Books India.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.
- Vanita, R., & Kidwai, S. (Eds.). (2001). *Same-sex love in India: Readings from literature and history*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Narrain, A., & Bhan, G. (Eds.). (2005). *Because I have a voice: Queer politics in India*. Yoda Press.
- Gopinath, G. (2005). *Impossible desires: Queer diasporas and South Asian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Bose, B., & Bhattacharyya, S. (Eds.). (2007). *The phobic and the erotic: The politics of sexualities in contemporary India*. Seagull Books.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. New York University Press.