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Desire on the Move: Mapping the Performative and Semiotic Expressions of Same-Sex Intimacy in Prathyush Parasuraman’s “Two Bi Two”

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Abstract: The paper makes an attempt at elucidating the performative, semiotic and spatial dimensions of same sex intimacy in the light of Prathyush Parasuraman’s short story “Two by Two” which is set in the transitory space of the ‘two by two’ compartment of a Mumbai local suburban train. In Parasuraman’s narrative, train functions not merely as a mode of public transport, but also as a contact zone that offers an arena for queer sensual expressions. The story brilliantly captures how the public mechanical interior of the local city train affords a space for queer romantic performances, by circumventing the dominant heteronormative gaze of the city. It tries to argue that, as a transitory counterspace which disrupts the dominant heteronormative ideologies of the city, the ‘two by two’ represents a unique intersection of queerness, desire, and mobility. The paper also attempts to explore the ‘closeted’ dimensions of same sex desire within the commuter corridors of Mumbai’s urban landscape, as portrayed in the story. The study also probes into how the story depicts the manifestations of same sex desire in the realms of space and language.

Keywords: *Closet, Performativity, Semiotics of Desire, Same Sex Desire*

This paper focuses on how intimacy unfolds within the public transitory space of a ‘two by two’ compartment in Prathyush Parasuraman’s short story “Two Bi Two”, where proximity, and anonymity reconfigure the boundaries of desire. It endeavours to demonstrate how the queer characters in the story performatively negotiate the interiors of a public vehicle to express same sex desire, which further gets echoed in the linguistic codes employed by the narrator. It also seeks to analyse the different manifestations of ‘closet’ sketched in the story. Through close reading the story, the paper illuminates the sensory details employed by the author, and spotlight on how the mobile compartment affords spatial and performative liberation for the narrator and other gay men, for the political expression of their sexual identity.

Cities can often be “regarded as spaces of social and sexual liberation because of a perception that they offer anonymity and escape from the familiar community relations of small towns and villages” (Johnston and Longhurst 80). The formation and mobilisation of gay and lesbian communities around the world are seen to be facilitated by cities as sexual identities are “geographically contingent” (Oswin 87-88). As Gregory Woods proffers cities in gay fiction represent erotic abundance, with;

So many men, so little time... Specific locations, by virtue of the opportunities they offer for meeting, or even for actual sexual encounters... Parks, public lavatories, shopping arcades or markets with a particular reputation and, of course, gay bars and nightclubs repeatedly crop up in gay fiction as sites of significance, where important plot-driving events take place. Some such spaces are shared with the general populace or are predominantly gay only at night. (233)

“Two Bi Two” is set in the city of Mumbai, a bustling social epicentre that serves as India’s entertainment and financial hub. The city is also characterized by its erotic topographies, featuring red-light streets such as Kamathipura, which is notorious for prostitution and sex trafficking since the early 19th century (Sen 406). As the LGBTQIA+ activist Ashish Pandya remarks, the city has also emerged as a space that fosters evolving sexual deviancies, by nurturing a queer subculture (Sen, “Mumbai Queer”).

The cultural influence of Bollywood, and other historical and geographical factors have collectively played a role in the rise of gay culture in Mumbai. In *Gay Bombay* Parmesh Shahani quotes Ashok Row Kavi, according to whom, “Bombay in the 1970s and 1980s was ripe for a gay sub-culture. A distinct class of salaried professionals had a firm grip on the city’s cultural life. A corporate work ethic had finally evolved” (85). Shahani writes that certain locations such “the Chowpatty beach,

the Gateway of India promenade, certain public gardens” train stations and train compartments served as “popular cruising spots” for gay men of the city (85).

Several literary works have engaged with the representations of gay relationships within Mumbai’s cultural context. *The Boy Friend* (2003) by R. Raja Rao stands as one of the pivotal fictional engagements of the city’s gay subculture in the late twentieth century. Similarly, Mahesh Dattani’s play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (2013) delves into the inner turmoil and societal constraints faced by homosexuals, in a space dominated by heterosexuals. The present paper specifically examines “Two Bi Two” by Parasuraman, in which the author depicts the performance of same sex desire and intimacy within the transitory space of a mobile train compartment.

“Operating over 2300 train services every single day for over 7.5 million people commuting daily,” the Local rail network of Mumbai stands as one of the busiest and cheapest commuter train systems in the world (“Lifeline of Mumbai”). In addition to being a means of routine conveyance for a vast majority of the citizenry, these trains also afford a fertile setting for the thriving gay subculture of Mumbai. Mandar Gupte observes that generally local trains of the city has around 12 to 16 coaches, and the second carriage of these trains, which is commonly dubbed as ‘Two by Two,’ is a “colourful gay cruising spot”. When gay and bisexual men enter this carriage, their “eyes start to look for connections” and even without any verbal communication they engage in intimate acts (Gupte). He adds that “More than the act itself, it is the thrill of being in the public eye, and yet successfully getting sexually titillated is what makes this experience so enthralling” (Gupte).

Parasuraman’s “Two Bi Two” is framed as a monologue of an unnamed protagonist who is recounting his homosexual intimate encounters during his daily commute through the city. By substituting ‘Bi’ for ‘by’, the title effectively mirrors the narrator’s sexual orientation. The local train which is in constant flux through different parts of Mumbai city functions as a pivotal trope in the story, which also hints at the short-lived queer relationships of the narrator.

The narrator defines the ‘two by two’ compartment as a “cauldron of desire, where men know, know that men also want men” (Parasuraman 75-76). Thus, the story’s title itself operates performatively, foregrounding how even the act of entering into this compartment becomes a social performance of coming out of concealed identities. As ‘2x2 compartments’ in Mumbai local trains are acclaimed for fostering queer expressions, they serve as sites where homosexual and bisexual identities get enacted. The congested compartment grants anonymity and proximity to characters, allowing for free expression of their identities. Judith Butler’s influential theory of performativity suggests “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by

the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33). She also argues that gender is not innate, but is expressed and maintained through “the stylized repetition of acts” (179).

The story begins with the narrator’s confession on engaging in an intimate act with a stranger during one of his daily commutes in a Mumbai Local. The narrator finds himself both “ravenous and reluctant”, a state of internal conflict that prevented him from withdrawing himself from the act. He says, “I should have swatted *his* hands off” but the man’s fingers “found their way under my kurta, into my pants, searching for the sleeve of the boxer” (71). However, despite an initial impulse to restrain the stranger, the narrator slowly starts to derive pleasure from the act. By engaging in sensual expression throughout their short journey from Dadar to Mulund, the narrator and the stranger attempt to reconfigure the public space by transforming it into a performative site.

The contradiction between the explicit expression of desire and yearning sketched in the introductory sequence of the story spotlights on how both of their bodies function as ‘closets’ of hidden queer identities. The term closet which literally denotes “a small, confining place,” where “things are hidden” was theorised by the American literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as the “defining structure for gay oppression” (Brown 1-2). In his much-acclaimed *Closet Space*, Micheal P. Brown reconceptualized the notion of closet, as a spatial and material metaphor. Brown wagers that “at some times, the closet seems to shrink to become the space of the body itself...” (45).

In the story, the stranger’s wedding ring further becomes the symbol of his closeted identity, as it functions as a container that encases the testament of his heteronormativity, and hides the truth of his bisexual identity. It acts as a site of “knowing by not knowing”. Brown states that for Sedgwick closet is an open secret and a social performance, thus, even if people often know someone is gay, they pretend as if they don’t (Parasuraman 79). The stranger knows that he is a bisexual, but by wearing the wedding ring he ensures that the society sees him only as a heterosexual man. Thus, the ring also allows him to move through the city without being noticed. His choice to wear the wedding ring can also be read as a “closet dynamic” that he uses to maintain the concealment, in response to the dominant heteronormative ideologies. As Gray Smith and others argue, the closet dynamics are:

... the multiple discourses and practices through which homosexuality is made visible or invisible in different social contexts. Closet dynamics emerged out of social relations that construct an antagonism between heterosexuality and homosexuality. ...People who engage in homosexual acts are compelled toward an interplay of secrecy and disclosure--a dynamic that also generates homosexual identities. (54)

In an instance, the narrator notices an unknown man, who is silently watching the narrator and the strangers, observing his hands “disappearing” under his bags. The narrator’s act of hiding his hands, can be read a closet dynamic to manage the visibility of his queer identity. Physical movements and behaviours are indeed important factors through which body functions as a closet that needs to be managed.

Though the space of the compartment gives a deceptive sense of freedom, it is still a manoeuvred space where the power dynamics of surveillance is covertly deployed. The spectator who is observing the narrator and the stranger becomes a part of what Michel Foucault calls as “double impetus”, the game of pleasure and power. He experiences the pleasure of surveillance, watching the narrator and the stranger who becomes an actor and actant in the ‘performance’. When the narrator says “he won’t stop staring. I let him” (Parasuraman 75), he too feels the pleasure of being observed. Thus, this instance throws light on how “power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting” (Foucault 45).

The manifestation of closet is not localized solely at corporeal level in the story. Rather, the compartment which is clogged with male bodies also operates as a closeted space. As Brown contends, apart from being a “metaphor for the concealment, erasure, or ignorance of gays’ sexualities” closet can also “have spatiality, an existence in space that has location and situation, which signifies placement, interaction, movement and accessibility” (141). Through the spatial quality, the closet functions as a “material strategy and tactic” that conceals, erases, and makes gay people invisible (141). Lesbians and gays erotically thrive in closeted spaces “successfully through a number of creative and generative strategies” (Brown 138). The narrator reminisces that during his first year in the city he felt “torqued like a lopsided wave between shore and shoal” while travelling in these local trains (Parasuraman 72). Even after several years, his journey in the 2x2 compartment feels the same to him, marked by its stifling density. Though the compartment is crowded with “exhausted men hanging like laundry from the footboard” (72), the stranger disregards their presence and unhesitatingly continues to engage with the narrator’s body. By comparing other men to laundry, the narrator neglects their presence and reconfigures the public space into a private closet. The anonymity offered by the compartment, among the mass of male bodies, is one of the factors that provides a comforting space for the expression of same sex desires. The homogeneity created by men in the space too plays a pivotal role in making it a closet, where sexual desires of the characters get materialized.

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault examines how the architecture of the eighteenth-century secondary schools actively enabled and shaped expressions of desire (27-28). He states that, though it seemed “sex was hardly spoken of at all in these institutions”, but its design including “the space for classes, the shape of the tables, the planning of the recreation lessons, the distribution of the dormitories (with or without partitions, with or without curtains), the rules for monitoring bedtime and sleep periods—all this referred, in the most prolix manner, to the sexuality of children” (28).

Evidently, in “Two Bi Two” Parasuraman illustrates how the design and framework of the compartment shape the expressions of desire. The narrator recounts that though he had purchased tickets for the first-class compartment, he abruptly moved to the spot where the ‘two by two’ compartment, which picks up “the lower middle class and the queers,” usually halts. He observes “men who had also made note of the pillars, the familiar markers, were waiting, eyeing me as I eyed them, ricocheting glances which can fall on one’s skin as either accusation or longing” (Parasuraman 78). Just as Foucault exposes how the architecture of secondary schools stages desire, the specific geography of the compartment also facilitates the display of same sex intimacy.

Before the narrator steps out of the train, he signals the stranger, who then helps him to neaten his kurta by “passing his hands over the creases” and zips him up, to erase the trace of their dalliance, before he gets out of the compartment. He adds, “retracing and reversing my dishevelled state, making sure I look presentable to the world outside, and moves aside to make space for me to squeeze through...and the station arrives, and I am spat out, and I straighten myself” (81). This instance implies that before ‘coming out’ of the ‘closeted’ compartment, the narrator is coerced to look “presentable” to the outside heteronormative world and once he gets out of the space he “straightens” himself and treasures his queer identity inside his body, which acts as a ‘closet’.

While walking back to his home, the narrator is consumed by the thoughts of the stranger and his wedding ring. His mind continues to linger on the experience, which had shaken him out of his heterosexual complacency. He records:

A breeze dislodges a clump of these papery blooms from the branches, and the thick, heated air holds them suspended for a moment longer. As I rest my beaten body against a parked scooter, the kurta stuck against my back, sweat as glue, my underarms a marshy pit, and each fold of fat oiling a paste of dirt, some petals settle on my head. I can feel their weightlessness. I do not dust them off, I do not, no I don't.... I let it be.
(81)

When he says “let it be”, it reveals that the psychological sensations of the sexual experience have displaced him from the shackles of ‘straight’ fixity. By embracing the queer fluidity, he decides to ‘come out’ of his closeted identity, acknowledging that though it is less “presentable”, it is more ‘natural’.

The story also offers a fecund ground to interrogate the semiotic dimensions of “male-to-male social-sexual activity”. It is prefaced by an epigraph drawn from the closing lines of Gieve Patel’s poem “Bombay Central,” which effectively serves as a grounding to the intimate link between Mumbai local trains and the city’s desire cartography. In the poem, Patel details the scenes and smells of the Bombay Central Railway station, while he was sitting in Saurashtra Express which was preparing to depart. As the poet describes that the “odour” the train carries makes him “sink back” into the “hard wooden third-class seat” just like into a “divine cushion”, it hints at a bodily surrender to the intimate experience offered by the space. In the preceding lines of the poem, the “station odour” was described as an amalgam of smells of engine oils, human sweat, dung, urine and many other things, which was hitting the poet’s “nostril as one singular”. Finally, the speaker concludes with his realisation that this journey will not offer him a “meditation on the nature of truth and beauty”. Patel’s poem, thus, aptly provides the alphabet for the semiotics of queer desire articulated in the story.

In the opening passage of the monologue, the narrator employs certain words which function as tactile signifiers of their expression of desire. The terms such as “graze”, “flirt”, “slips” and “smoothened” carries sexual denotations, and exposes how the public compartment becomes a site of sexual liberation for both the narrator and the stranger. Similarly, in another instance he uses terms like “gaping” and “boring” to sketch how the stranger ‘plays’ with his body by effectively queering the boundaries of the public compartment.

The story also throws light on the visceral connection between olfactory senses and desire. Smell is often is perceived as one the “most elusive of all senses, and the most intimate” (Morantz). In a similar vein, Rachel Herts in *The Scent of Desire* writes that “more than any other sensory experience, fragrances have the ability to... titillate our desires” (11).

Caught up in the intensity of the sexual act, the narrator slowly pressed his face against the stranger’s armpit to inhale his odour. He describes the stranger’s scent as “rotten, spiced secretions, the deposits of his workday, currying under a bicep that has been stretched into sculpture throughout the years. I rub the bridge of my nose against its contours” (Parasuraman 73). His scent which is depicted as a byproduct of the chemical reactions of ingredients of his workday brilliantly frames links between consumption and desire. Moreover, by aestheticizing his “rotten” odour, the narrator is even finding intimacy in the stranger’s bodily discards.

While these metaphors superficially serve to articulate how olfactory sensations arouse sexual desires, they also offer a voyeuristic image of male beauty. The stranger's chiselled biceps where the "spiced secretions" of his workday are "currying" crystalizes into a visual image. When the narrator says "I want to wear him. Mouths closed, he breathes out heavily through the nose, that warm exhale on my temples, my face looking away" (73), his words slowly become expressions of desire. His urge to "wear" the stranger, implies his deep admiration over his physique and his desire totally get immersed in him. Moreover, as described in Patel's poem, the narrator observes that the train carries a collective blend of odours, "in the pits, in the breath, and most perceptibly, most deceptively, in the small grotto behind the ear" (73). By detailing the tender spot behind the stranger's ear as a site of intimacy, the narrator extends his fascination with the stranger's body. Together the metaphors employed by the narrator create a language of desire, where the 'edible' and the evocative converge.

This article has analysed the significance of transient urban spaces in portraying contemporary queer experience, through close reading Prathyush Parasuraman's "Two Bi Two". Rather than portraying desire as a purely subjective experience, the short story renders it as spatially and linguistically mediated. In the story the 'two by two' compartment actively structures the conditions under which queer desire emerges. Both the compartment and the bodies of the protagonist and stranger act as 'closet' in the text. However, after affective awakening, following the sexual encounter with the stranger, the protagonist decides to come out of his closeted self and embrace his true identity.

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