

# **Interrogating “Queer” through Prajwal Parajuly’s**

## *Land Where I Flee*

A Dissertation Submitted

To

**Sikkim University**



In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the  
**Degree of Master of Philosophy**

By

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The content of this thesis has also been subjected to plagiarism check.

This is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of English, School of Languages and Literature.

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### CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled “Interrogating Queer through Prajwal Parajuly’s *Land Where I Flee*” submitted to Sikkim University for fulfilment of the requirement of the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of English, embodies the result of bonafide research and work carried out by Nikita Rai under my guidance and supervision. No part of the thesis has been submitted for any other Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by her.

We recommend this thesis to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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**“Interrogating Queer through Prajwal Parajuly’s *Land Where I Flee*”**

Submitted by Nikita Rai under the supervision of Dr. Ram Bhawan Yadav of the Department of English, School of Languages and Literature, Sikkim University.

Signature of Candidate

Countersigned by Supervisor

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- **Nikita Rai**

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

#### Locating Queer in the West

‘Queer’ is a term that has its origins entirely in the West. The Oxford English Dictionary places ‘queer’ as “strange; unusual” (Hornby, 1235). Of late the term has been reclaimed and although it is still lacking in a definite meaning, today, it is an umbrella term that refers to not just homosexuals but also shelters individuals belonging to the sexual minority who consider themselves bisexual, intersex, asexual, as well as the gender minority along with those who do not conform to any gender bias such as transgenders and queer people. The usage of this term is still mired in controversy in both academic and non-academic discourse as some sections still see it as a pejorative term while others see this re-appropriation as a way of countering the heterocentric monogamous views prevalent in society.

‘Queer’ is a term whose usage in the past signalled a feeling far from endearment all the while establishing a hierarchy in heteronormative power relations. Within the gamut of social structures, people who identify as queer or those who have been labelled so have time and again found themselves at the margins and very often at the receiving end of homophobic, transphobic, gender-based violence. Historically, the term ‘queer’ was recorded as a slur as early as 1894 in the letters of the 9<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Queensberry, John Douglas. He used the phrase “Snob Queers” in levelling charges of sodomy against Oscar Wilde who was engaged in a sexual liaison with his son. Later, American newspapers took to using the term derogatively in describing homosexuality as an

abnormality<sup>1</sup>. This usage was reflective of the social institutionalized mood towards people of alternate sexualities and gender inclinations. Such a 'queer' labelling was a result of the bipolarities that have long ensured 'stability' within society. Some of these include the dichotomy between good and evil, white and black, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, thin and fat and so forth which continue to govern the societal norms. Although these divides are not water-tight they have been taken to be so which has led to the establishment of a superior and an inferior order; the creation of the 'speaker' and the 'spoken for'. It was not for nothing that Beauvoir commented "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought." (Beauvoir, 17) Owing to this the 'othered' categories have very often found themselves pushed to the peripheral regions, robbed of their voices and rights. They are (mis)represented, stereotyped through someone else's vision. However there are multiple layers in the hierarchy of 'othering' with some being less marginalised than their peers. In the case of LGBTIA+<sup>2</sup> individuals, trans<sup>3</sup> people of colour find themselves discriminated against more than a white cisgendered<sup>4</sup> male gay individual. At this instant, race and ethnicity have predominant roles where the trans person is judged solely on the basis of their appearance. For a person who has no inkling of who a trans person of colour is, there are several registers which they must clear even before hoping to empathise with them. These may include the race of the person and all the prejudices surrounding it, the skin colour of the person where white is usually taken to be a sign of purity and disease-free as opposed to the profanity myth of black or brown skin colour and eventually the gender identification or the non-conformism that the transgender person abides by.



Derogatively categorising people as 'queer' ensured that the status quo which consisted of cisgendered people in heterosexual relations would not be disrupted and that they would remain the ideal. In the West, the advent of Christianity in the 1st century AD and its ingression into the social milieu meant that the communion of Adam and Eve was perceived as the epitome of all relationships that was in a way, indicative of an individual's relation with the divine. No further room was spared for queer individuals with some passages in the Bible even being used to condemn them. A passage from the book of Timothy reads,

“But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”<sup>5</sup>

In the hands of the clergy such passages were interpreted in favour of heterosexual relations leading to procreation over alternate sexual behaviour. In a way, labelling a person 'queer' meant the dismissal of that individual who did not conform to societal norms. According to Erving Goffman, social stigma is “the phenomenon whereby an individual with an attribute which is deeply discredited by his/her society is rejected as a result of the attribute. Stigma is a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity.”<sup>6</sup> This results in a reduction or a 'typification' of the person regardless of their feelings or perception about themselves and this is exactly what the stigmatization of the term 'queer' and all its attributes led to. Since knowledge was pre-eminently governed by the clergy, one can well imagine the discrimination faced by the 'queer' deviants of society. Another passage from the book of Leviticus is more direct in its approach

towards disdaining homosexuality which reads, “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.”<sup>7</sup> The trial of the Templar Knights in 1307 testifies to the Church’s attitude towards homosexuality. The Templar Knights were recruited to guard the Holy Sepulchre as well as the pilgrims who visited it. With time, they grew prosperous and owned vast amounts of land and treasure. This was perceived as a threat by the Church under Pope Clement V. Eventually, he accused their whole order, consisting of 140 knights, of homosexuality and sodomy. These knights were put on trial, tortured and eventually burned at the stake. This incident shows that even though the Church had political reasons behind the trial, homosexuality was deemed as an intolerable offense against God<sup>8</sup>.

With its bleak history with the Church, and a general lack of understanding led people to believe that homosexuality was a disease which could be cured with therapy. Glover and Kaplan discuss at length the various treatments administered to such ‘diseased’ people.

For much of the twentieth century, ‘homosexuality’ was more than a ‘name’ that dared not be spoken: within clinical medicine it has been a diagnostic category, a suitable case for treatment, a condition to be cured wherever possible by psychotherapeutic and other, less savoury methods like electro-convulsive therapy. Because of the institutional prestige enjoyed by the medical profession, this way of thinking leached into and strengthened popular beliefs and prejudices about which sexual preferences were acceptable and which were not. It therefore took some time before this terminology could be turned against itself, and ‘homosexuality’ started “to demand that its legitimacy or its “naturalness” be acknowledged’ ....” (Glover and Kaplan, 116-117)

Presently, queer has been reclaimed as an inclusive term for gender and sexual minorities but earlier it was used synonymously with homosexuality and sodomy. Queer may have stepped into the political threshold now but it was originally used to talk of 'perverted' sexual behaviour. Talking about the standard medical approaches to 'cure' homosexuality in the 1960s in New Zealand, Laurie Guy says,

“Treatment of homosexuals in the 1960s was largely based on psychoanalytic and/or behaviourist understandings, combined with a prevalent normative view of appropriate behaviour patterns. In such a climate, the therapeutic focus on altering homosexual orientation, although not commonly practised, was widely viewed as an appropriate approach to the perceived plight of homosexual people.” (118)

Some of the methods such as inducing lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) or masculine hormone therapy appear reckless and experimentative at the cost of the patient's mental and physical health. But these were considered appropriate primarily because it was the post-war period when science had a high reputation and people thought scientists were not capable of being faulty in their judgements. (Guy, 116)

From being condemned by the Church, to being labelled diseased, homosexuals and queer individuals in general have found themselves facing the brunt of society's insistence on conformism. This constant demand to stick to the normative has not only prevented queer identifying individuals from embracing themselves but it has also contributed much to the increasing homophobic, transphobic attitude against them. In a study carried out in the United States by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs in 2014, statistics showed that in their lifetimes, 20-25% of lesbian and gay people are victims of hate crimes.<sup>9</sup> The statistics showing hate crime against the

LGBTIA+ community in their report, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Hiv-Affected Hate Violence in 2015* (see fig.1) and the dismal police response with at

#### NUMBER OF HATE VIOLENCE HOMICIDES PER YEAR SINCE 2006

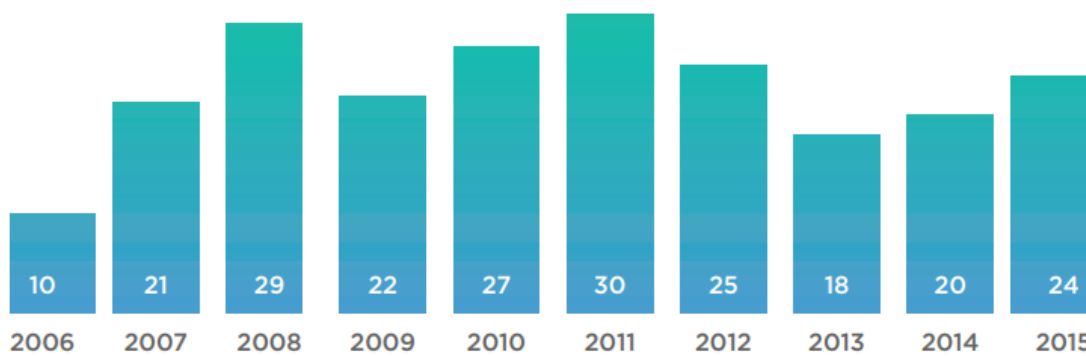


Fig. 1. Number of Hate Violence Homicides per Year since 2006. Figure from Emily Waters, Chai Jindasurat, Cecelia Wolfe, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Hiv-Affected Hate Violence in 2015*(New York: New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, 2016), 18. Web

least 36% of the total 126 survivors experiencing verbal abuse, 16% experiencing physical abuse and 3% experiencing sexual violence (Waters, 11) is an indicator that violence and atrocities against the queer community shows no sign of receding and that misconceptions about the community still persist.

In another study conducted at the University of Rochester to check sexual orientation and the effect of parental control on one's sexual preferences, certain details were highlighted. These included findings that stated homophobia is more prominent in people who have not acknowledged their attraction to the same sex and who grew up with 'autonomy-thwarting parents.'(Weinstein, 814) Weinstein observed that the respondents who identified as straight but showed a strong attraction to the same sex in psychological tests, may have felt threatened by homosexuals who reminded them of their repressed desires which possibly manifested through violence. This could perhaps explain the increasing hate crimes against the LGBTIA+ community over the years.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of the hate crimes and the prejudices, the queer community has striven to reclaim its identity and to send the message out that their identities and preferences are natural and inherent. The re-appropriation of the term 'queer' was one of the first steps they took to assert themselves. In the USA, the grim history of the Stonewall Riots and the Government's negligence of the AIDS epidemic especially among the LGBT youth in the 1980s called for a radical change in public perception and policy-making. It was towards the closure of the 1980s that the term 'queer', which had so long been used as a pejorative, was reclaimed along with other symbols such as the pink triangle which had once served to single out homosexuals in Nazi-run Germany. In June 1990, Queer Nation, one of the forerunners of the queer pride movement in America, came up with a flyer at the New York Gay Pride Parade. Titled "Queers Read This", it had a passage which explained the implementation of the queer label,

Queer. It's forcibly bittersweet and quaint at best---weakening and painful at worst. Couldn't we just use "gay" instead? It's a much brighter word and isn't it synonymous with "happy?"...

Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world....

Queer, unlike GAY, doesn't mean MALE.

And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it's a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy.<sup>11</sup>

This radicalisation owes much to the studies made in Western academia. Sigmund Freud was perhaps one of the first people to observe that sexual behaviour is a construct and that society has a strong hand in enforcing it within its premises. Others like Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, challenged the repressive hypothesis which claimed that European society especially with the growth of the industries and the bourgeoisie in the Victorian era was marked by a severe repression. Sexuality was said to be discussed only within the 'sacred' realm of marriage while others were sent to the 'shadows'. Foucault argued that it was in fact the reverse as more and more governmental and social institutions engaged in a dialectic on sexuality to establish the 'truth' about it, thereby doctoring a uniform view of it. His ideas on the construction of sexual behaviour and discourse paved the way for fresh inquiry into alternate sexualities and the performativity of gender which lie at the heart of queer theory today. Judith Butler's groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble*, sought to break the gender binaries and in doing so, not only was she able to give a solid footing to an area of study that was relatively new but she also gave a voice to people who were held in denial as far as their identities were concerned. In the Western sphere where this term originated, it is in flux as much as sexual and gendered identities are. Robert J. Wallis writes of the broad spectrum under queer theory today. He uses David Halperin's definition of queer which "acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant." (Wallis, 253) Queer is constantly expanding and

evolving. It goes beyond sexual orientation and gendered roles. It is a discourse; a perception; a deconstruction of the myths and walls that society has structured around it. It challenges and destabilises the norm.

### **Queer and 'Queering' Indian Tradition**

Among South Asian countries such as India and Nepal, it is observed that queerness has been in existence and is not a foreign import. However, developments in the study of queer communities and practices require further exploration because this phenomenon has been around long enough to pass as an essential part of South Asian culture. Whether or not they should share common ground with the growing body of queer theory in the West is a matter which requires further deliberation.

Queering is a way of perceiving phenomena from a queer perspective and applying queer theoretical perspectives to it. Commenting on Roy Wagner's *Invention of Culture*, David A.B.Murray observes how Wagner identified culture as not something that is given but an illusion or a construct made by the hegemonic classes. Since members of the queer community have been a part of the peripheral voices in society, there is a silence in the assertion of their culture. The re-interpretation of Indian culture and tradition after colonization led to the marginalization of queer interpretations of them even though queerness as a social phenomenon was already in existence in the pre-Colonial era. Therefore, queering tradition is a retrospection of queer expression, practices, performances, belief systems. However, as Madhavi Menon and Jonathan Goldberg point out, there should be no parenthetical limitations in queering tradition because it is, after all, a perspective.

In Indian Hindu philosophy, the concept of Shiva as the *ardhanareshwara* with his grandeur and grace epitomises the idea of the dual nature of a soul consisting of the male and the female. Gender non-conformists would perhaps beg to differ from this male-female binary but it does stand to show that within the network of Hindu philosophy, which intermingles with religion, such an idea has always existed. Found in the *Mahabharata*, the tale of Shikandin begins with the Princess Amba vowing to be born as a man in her next life and kill Bhishma because he had stolen her rights as a woman. In her next life, she is reborn to the King Drupada as a female but bears with her the prophecy that she will be a woman-man. Her father believes in Shiva's prophecy that she will be changed into a man someday and calling her a boy by the name of Shikandin, he provides her with all the training necessary for young princes, and even gets her married to the daughter of the neighbouring kingdom of Dasarnaka. However, Shikandin's wife finds out about her real identity which creates a rift between their kingdoms. Shikandin, led by a desire to salvage her father's kingdom, goes deep into the forest to end her life. There she meets the Yaksha Sthunakarna who grants her the boon of becoming a perfect man by taking away her female attributes and giving her his male attributes on the grounds that Shikandin returns them to the Yaksha once her trial period is over. As fate would have it, Shikandin eventually goes on to kill Bhishma thereby fulfilling Amba's oath. ( Vanita and Kidwai, 36-42) Interestingly, Ruth Vanita points out that this sex-change is triggered not on account of Shikandin's desire to kill Bhishma but rather to appease her father-in-law over her marriage to a woman. Kumkum Roy's translation of the sex-change of Shikandin in Ved Vyas' Mahabharata reads,



...a beautiful daughter was born to the sonless monarch Drupada. But his illustrious wife announced: 'A son is born on me.' King Drupada got all the rituals performed for the concealed one as if she were really a son...Believing the words of that God of immense energy, he concealed the fact that the child was a girl and said: 'He is a boy'.(ibid, 38-39)

Another tale from the Mahabharata which revolves around a queer theme is the friendship between Arjuna and Krishna. Many times in the epic, an account of the perfect love that Krishna and Arjuna share is given. Ruth Vanita shows how more than once, Krishna makes a declaration of his love for his friend,

Thou are mine and I am thine, while all that is mine is thine also! He that hateth thee hateth me as well, and he that followeth thee followeth me! O thou irrepressible one, thou art Nara and I am Narayana or Hari! ...O Partha, thou art from me and I am from thee! (ibid, 6)

It is without a doubt that their friendship is deep so much so that Krishna values him above all his wives and children and says that life would be rendered meaningless without Arjuna. Another tale that emerges from the Mahabharata is that of Arjuna's son, Prince Iravan. It is said that victory for the Pandavas at Kurukshetra would only be guaranteed if Arjuna's beloved son, Iravan was sacrificed to the Goddess Kali. Apparently Prince Iravan was unmarried and while he accepted his fate, he refused to die a virgin. Since no young woman was willing to wed Iravan only to become widowed the next day, Krishna came up with the solution to take the form of a woman, Mohini and fulfill Iravan's last wish. The following day, Krishna, as Mohini, mourned the death of

Iravan as was expected of widows. In the present day this myth is celebrated as the *Koothandavar Festival* in Tamil Nadu every year where hijras or eunuchs known as Aravanis marry the deity Koothandavar (Iravan) en-masse at the temple. On the last day of the festival, like bereaved widows, they wipe the vermilion from their foreheads and smash their bangles in mourning<sup>12</sup>.

Apart from these, Indian mythology abounds in tales of same-sex relationships. In the *Shiva Purana* we are acquainted with the details surrounding the birth of Kartikeya. It is said that he was born from Shiva's semen which was initially swallowed by Agni. Looking at such accounts, Sudhir Kakar writes that there was a 'tradition of quiet tolerance' in ancient India. As opposed to present day notions on homosexuality, back in the days, Hindu society did consist of a group of individuals known as *kliba* which was, according to Kakar,

...a catch-all term to include someone who was sterile, impotent, castrated, a transvestite, a man who had oral sex with other men, who had anal sex as a recipient, a man with mutilated or deficient sexual organs, a man who produced only female children, or, finally, a hermaphrodite.<sup>13</sup>

While Hindu society did look down on homosexuality, it was the homosexual rather than the homosexual act that was the cause of scorn. Kakar adds that such activity was "ignored or stigmatized as inferior but never actively persecuted"<sup>14</sup>. Even the Dharmashastras mention that one who engaged in such acts was given mild punishment in the form of a ritualistic bath or fined. Among the women folk, ancient Hindu laws stated that a woman who had intercourse with a virgin girl was to have two of her fingers cut off. This was done not on the grounds that she had engaged in sexual liaisons with

another woman but because she had 'deflowered' the girl. Modern day feminists argue that this was done to curb the choice and freedom of women as far as their sexualities were concerned. Society was as patriarchal then as it is today and since men saw women as their right, any activity that sought to breach this control was not tolerated. However, the fact remains that homosexuals were not looked on without compassion. In the present day, we may have developed a bias against such individuals and their interests but ancient India definitely had a more tolerant approach to them. A topic of much controversy, an examination of the carvings at the Khajuraho temples built by the Chandela dynasty shows how queer sexual activity was very much a part of Indian society. Over the years religious fundamentalism and misinterpretations of culture may have led to the negation of such facts but there is no denying that the carvings of Khajuraho depict various stages of sexual activity between those of the same sex. While the outer walls abound in such carvings, the inner sanctum of the temple is pitch dark and empty. This form is in keeping with ancient Hindu mysticism which saw *kama*(pleasures) as an integral part of one's life as much as *dharma*(righteous conduct), *artha*(finances), and *moksha*(salvation)<sup>15</sup>.

Another document of ancient India which testifies to same-sex relationships and queer communities is the Kama Sutra written around the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. by Vatsyayana. In it he discusses at length the various forms in which lesbianism occurs and also highlights how homosexuality formed an integral part of Indian society. Following Richard Burton's translation of the text in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the world was given a different insight into Indian culture. In a way, the *Kama Sutra* (circa 4<sup>th</sup> century BC), in linking mysticism with sex, revolutionized the entire study and procedure of sexual

intercourse like no other. In Part Two, chapter nine of the text, one will find details on *Auparishtaka* or ‘Mouth Congress’ as well as about the eunuchs who were to perform them. Apparently, eunuchs dressed up as either male or female and engaged in the act of pleasuring the male or female. Moreover, the importance of transvestites has also been enumerated by the author who goes on to say that they had miraculous powers and that their presence at weddings and births was considered auspicious. This idea is of course still relevant today but unlike the former glory the hijra community shared as courtesans, bodyguards and confidantes, most of them have been reduced to mendicancy and prostitution as well.

Among the Muslim community there have been accounts of pederasty as well. The idea was that a Muslim man had the license to engage in such activity so long as he fulfilled his duty as a husband. The autobiography of Emperor Babur even reveals his preference for a boy over his wife. In his *Baburnama*, Babur openly expresses his love for a young boy named Baburi in a couplet.

May none be as I, humbled and wretched and love-sick;

No beloved as thou art to me, cruel and careless. (Vanita and Kidwai, 160)

### **The Politics of the Queer in India**

In looking at the politics of the queer, perhaps the first notion it carries is that it threatens to subvert the long-established norms of any society especially in relation to the heteronormative monogamous relationships idealised by it. As it stands to challenge the normative, people who identify as LGBTIA+ as well as their expressions and performances are looked down on and often considered a taboo. Vanita and Kidwai observe how the press creates different images of the queer and how some of which are

rendered acceptable and unacceptable in contemporary India. They observe that when same-sex marriage is parallel to those in the West, much sympathy is garnered for the couple. People in the country seem to empathise less with traditional or ritualistic forms of same-sex marriage such as the practice of marrying *devadasis* to the Goddess Yellamma or the *Koothandavar Festival* in Tamil Nadu where members of the hijra community marry the deity Lord Aravan en-masse. Vanita and Kidwai opine that the desire to keep up with the 'secular' Western media led many of these press houses to broaden their horizons. But the fact remains that change in social perception is a gradual process.

The usage of the term 'queer' in identifying a tradition that precedes Western modules of queer has not been without controversy, but the absence of a single term in describing them has led academicians like Pushpesh Kumar to speak in defence of the term saying that the usage speaks for the "absence of any 'pure' indigenous term to describe and capture both the powerlessness and assertion of non-heterosexual erotic desires, practices and identities in South Asia."(Kumar, 7) It may be observed that the advent of colonization into the fabric of Indian society clamped down on many of her institutions such as the institution of language and Indian theory itself. The white-washing done by Colonial culture has resulted in the absence of a proper framework in reading into the alternate sexualities and gendered minorities in Indian society. So, while there are specific terms used to describe members of the transgender community such as the commonly known *hijra* or even *kliba*, a space for their articulation still needs further refinement. Pushpesh Kumar criticizes this lack in the body of Indian Sociological thought by saying that it is in fact, a demonstration of an "inherent heterosexism."(ibid,

2) Perhaps one of the most archaic laws queer and human rights activists across India are contesting against is the draconic IPC 377 infamously brought in by Macauley in 1860 which states,

Unnatural offences.—Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with 1[imprisonment for life], or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. Explanation.—Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.”<sup>16</sup>

Although the politics of queer extend well beyond the issue of IPC 377, the fact that it exists indicates that it is not homosexuality or queerness which is a foreign import but rather homophobic laws such as these which continue to ail Indian society at large.

Understanding the workings of queer in India cannot be done without attempting to grasp the spaces they occupy in the social sphere. Generally social spaces are constructed to serve a particular purpose. According to Paul M. Churchland, a social space is an “intricate space of obligations, duties, entitlements, prohibitions, debts, affections, insults, allies, contracts, enemies, infatuations, compromises, mutual love, legitimate expectations, and collective ideals.”<sup>17</sup> Social space stands as metaphor for the experience of social life itself. Not only does it depict a perspective of oneself but it depicts the other too. Historically, the Indian queer community has occupied a certain space in society. Be it in the *Ramayana* where the *kliba* were blessed by Ram for their devotion towards him<sup>18</sup> or the eunuch general Malik Kafur<sup>19</sup> who ventured into a typically ‘designated-male’ space such as the military during the reign of the Ala-ud-din Khilji. The intricacies

behind the sanction that people like him received does open up room for discourse as it involves ‘intrusion’ into not just a physical space but a psychological space as well. In Postcolonial India, queer heterotopias changed owing to a change in social outlook. The personal turned political in the form of laws such as IPC 377 which called for an assertion of identity and basic choices, freedom and rights. This need to create a queer space meant forging one out of the social space of Indian society. One of the ways in which the phenomenon of queer spacing in the binary heterotopic space has occurred is the option of third gender in the mandatory sex option of admission forms to universities across India, both government and privately funded ones. This is an instant which proves that social space is entirely a product of humans which is not temporary and can be re-forged.

### **Queer in Gangtok, Sikkim and Prajwal Parajuly’s *Land Where I Flee***

Of late, there has been a paradigmatic shift in Indian academia to step beyond the threshold of canonical areas of study into the unexplored realms of Indian academic discourse. These include studies that look into the demographics, politics, culture, literature of areas such as Northeast India. This shift may have resulted from the need to re-present these regions. Subhadra Mitra Channa writes, “The Northeast as a whole is also projected by media and popular culture as a place of insurgency, a place that is not comfortable with its association with India, and overall the Northeast remains in the collective imagery as an essentialized ‘Other’.” (Channa, 89) Since its merger into the Indian Union in 1975, Sikkim has been amalgamated into the Northeastern region as the eighth state. Also, its proximity to Nepal, Bhutan and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal with which it shares a similar culture has led it to be included in the Eastern

Himalayan region. Being a newly found hotspot for research, there are many areas in Sikkim which need to be looked into. One of these is the area of gender and sexual minorities such as the LGBTIA+ community. Since homosexuality or any form of queer expression is inherent one cannot simply dismiss the lack of information about the queer community as an indicator of the absence of a community. There are no social platforms to address their needs and to organize them therefore there is an urgent need to understand the space they have carved out for themselves in the collective imaginary of the Sikkimese. At the same time it is crucial to know how they perceive themselves. Prajwal Parajuly's novel *Land Where I Flee* addresses the issue of space occupied by members of the queer community. Though a novel that primarily deals with the diasporic sensibility of the Sikkimese-Nepali community, it must be given credit for being the first work of fiction and perhaps the only so far in the region to address the dilemmas and issues faced by members of the queer community.

### **Literature Review**

In Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee*, displacement and identity emerge as two striking discourses which overlap and affect each other. The gender dimension to displacement is quite often misconstrued or overlooked; if the identities are queer then all the more so. In his portrayal of Prasanti and Agastaya, Parajuly has shown how the spaces they occupy mould their identities, how they view and present themselves to the world. Their limited choices are defined not just by their biological makeup but also by their social class. The character of Chitrlekaha Neupaney in the novel is representative of many Nepali-origin Indians who belong to an earlier time and who refuse to accept the changes that have come about with 'modernity'. Although she lives her life in fragments,



she holds a firm belief in her 'roots' and seeks to enforce them on her grandchildren who are settled abroad. Her strong resolve to find a suitable wife for her grandson Agastya little knowing about his preferences or perhaps even choosing to ignore them reflect the insistence upon traditionalism in a large section of the Nepali-speaking society of the region. This has pushed individuals who identify themselves as LGBTIA+ to feel less secure and has also created a lapse in theoretical discourse on the area.

*Gaurav ko Utkarsh*, a collection of memoirs, gives an insight into the lives of LGBTIA+ individuals in Nepal. It shows how, in the contemporary scenario, homophobia, a lack of awareness and understanding on the part of the families of the contributors led many of them to abandon their families and move to Kathmandu and even contemplate suicide. However, the support of the Blue Diamond Society gave a new impetus to these individuals enabling many of them to pursue their dreams. Some of them like Anjali Lama went on to be a successful transgender model while others like Roshan Mahato went on to actively campaign for LGBTIA+ rights. Among the narratives in the collection, *Chautarfi Dabau* by Sita Phuyal shows how homosexual relationships are still disapproved in contemporary Nepalese society which has led many individuals like Sita and her partner Ram to flee from their homes. Hypocrisy is the common strand that runs through societies in India and Nepal. Thus, while cultural practices receive social sanctioning, individuals like Sita, Ram, Roshan and even Anjali are not accepted into the greater fold of contemporary Nepali society.

Usha Sherchan's short story *Anapekchit Bari Pahiro* from her collection, *Tesro Rang*, accounts the love affair between two women, one of whom has been married

against her wishes. This story throws light on the restraints imposed by society in Nepal and the hypocrisy within it in spite of Nepal claiming to be forward in LGBTIA+ rights.

Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History* contributes much to the growing body of queering Indian traditions. Through their interpretations of canonical literary texts such as the Mahabharata as well as autobiographies of famed Mughal rulers such as Babur as well as stories, poetry from modern and medieval writers, they have sought to show how same-sex love has been in existence in India.

### **Scope of Research**

Queer is a form of expression that has woven itself into the fabric of Indian tradition throughout the ages. History is a matter of contention because it is written by those in power. In this manner, the parallel narratives and those at the margins risk losing their identity, individuality as well as legitimacy. This research will look into the historical and contemporary representations and manifestations of queer in Gangtok, Sikkim where the plot of the novel is primarily based.

### **Objectives of Research**

- To understand Prajwal Parajuly's depiction of the queer heterotopia in the novel and relate it to society in Gangtok at large.
- To understand what are the politics behind the manifestations of queer in contemporary society
- What are the categories of queer spaces in the region?
- What are the taboos surrounding queer in the region?

- Why do such taboos persist?

### **Research Problem**

There is a disjunction in terms of understanding the queer from a historical and a contemporary perspective. Post-colonial India led to an entirely different history being re-written which was in alignment with the views of the colonisers. This has led people to assume that homosexuality was brought in by them. When *Fire* was released in 1999, several theatres were attacked for screening it. Justifying these acts, Bal Thackeray said that such things were not part of Indian 'culture' which is in fact, a demonstration of the popular misconception about same-sex love being a Western import.

There is a need to develop a clear idea of the space occupied by the queer community in the social, psychological realm of the region. The dearth of research and a lack of awareness have created a situation whereby members of the queer community have become a taboo subject. From Gangtok, the only fully sanctioned social space they seem to have ventured into is Parajuly's novel. While there are no hate crimes involving these individuals, the fact remains that they have not been given sanction to the social spaces. If they have been given so, they have to conform to the social norms. It is also crucial to interrogate their idea of a queer space and how they have reclaimed it for their own.

Furthermore, there is a wide chasm between what is considered as tradition and traditionalism. While tradition would refer to the practices and beliefs which have been carried on from generation to generation across time and space, traditionalism insists on a certain way of seeing. It refers to the strict adherence to age-old stereotypical ideas and concepts in the face of changing times. It is a refusal to acknowledge change and is marked by exclusivity. The lack of any formal platform to organize, represent and give

voice to people of the LGBTIA+ community and the fact that research into the designated area is still in its nascent stage has contributed to the assumption that there is a lacuna as far this discourse is concerned. When things have been around long enough, there is a general tendency to take them for granted so this could be one of the reasons behind the lack of such institutions to represent them.

### **Research Methods and Methodology**

This research will involve a close reading of Parajuly's text with focus on the spatial dimension occupied by gender in the novel. Since there are no written accounts of or research done on queer communities in Gangtok, interaction, formal and semi-formal interviews will be conducted in spaces that have been designated as 'male' and 'female' spaces as well of those who identify themselves as LGBTIA+. Queer readings of the diaspora as well as class-based approaches to queer will also be taken into consideration. Psychological dimensions of queer will also be made. Select portions from Western theories on queer such as those by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler will also be used.

### **Chapter divisions**

1. Introduction
2. The Role of Society, Spaces and Places in the Lives of LGBTI+ individuals in Gangtok
3. Reading Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee*
4. Conclusion- Between the gaps

## Chapter II

### **The Role of Society, Spaces and Places in the Lives of Queer Individuals in Gangtok**

#### **Introduction**

Identifying oneself as queer or being part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, queer community constitutes part of a social stigma that is still very much prevalent in India as in other countries the world over. If one is to address the present body of Indian society which has evolved down the ages through various regimes and regencies, one will find that queerness is not wholly accepted within the folds of Indian society. Indian society in general claims to be diverse and strongly connected to their traditional familial roots, yet they “remain impervious to this difference among humans.” (Srivastava and Singh, 128) This, in turn, leads one to question the very idea of the ‘traditional’ in the context of Indian society as well as its evolution over the course of time. The historical archives portray a completely different picture as many sanctified Hindu texts such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are replete with descriptions of same-sex relationships and queer identifying individuals. Incidents of homosexual affairs among the Mughal rulers such as Babur, find a place in his autobiography *Baburnama*. Writing for Scroll.in about the Muslim community’s views on homosexuality, Shoaib Danial writes,

In the 18th century, Dargah Quli Khan, a nobleman from the Deccan travelling to Delhi, wrote a fascinating account of the city called the *Muraqqa-e-Dehli (The Delhi Album)*, which described just how mundane homosexuality was in Indo-Islamic society. At the public bazaars, male

prostitutes solicited openly and Khan spoke admiringly of how “young good-looking men danced everywhere and created great excitement”. (2016)

Over the years though, homophobia, along with the stigmatization of queer individuals, seems to have gradually woven itself into the fabric of Indian society causing the queer community to remain closeted and guarded about their identities and self-expression. People like Vikram Seth, who strongly advocate for queer rights and visibility claim that it is not homosexuality but rather homophobia which is unnatural to India<sup>20</sup>. Lord Macauley, who introduced the infamous English Education Act of 1835, is also responsible for having introduced Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalizes homosexual activity. This, in a way, works towards sanctioning violence, especially State-based violence against individuals who engage in homosexuality when in fact, the Right to Privacy has been declared a Fundamental Right by the Supreme Court of India<sup>21</sup>. Not just that, hatred towards alternate forms of sexuality is accompanied by vitriolic backlash against innocent individuals simply because they express themselves differently. For instance, a man who is not gay but might have “effeminate” tendencies may be a victim of bullying by another person who bases his perspective on certain stereotypes. Such an intrusion into the private space leads one to question whether the queer community in India has a space at all for themselves or even if at all they are safe in the public space. At this juncture it becomes crucial to provide for platforms where the queer community may represent themselves and feel more comfortable about expressing themselves in public. Some of these platforms may include improvements in the policies made by the government for the concerned community, re-modelling pedagogy in schools and higher educational institutions where sexual education and awareness ought

to be part of the curriculum and proper measures to ensure that individuals identifying as queer do not face harassment when faced with medical situations or in using public utilities. Prior to this, it becomes necessary to understand the perspectives of the “sexual minority” as well as the “sexual majority” with regard to grasping an idea of the space occupied by the queer community. Certain provisions have been undertaken by the Government of India such as the controversial Transgender Persons Bill of 2016, which has, to a large extent, been rejected by the queer community for being regressive. Other policies which seemed more positive in their approach included the recruitment of twenty-three transgender people by Kochi Metro earlier in 2017 (Nidheesh, 2017). Unfortunately, the ground reality was that several of the transgender employees had to resign from their jobs as they were refused or were overcharged for rent and accommodation by the locals leading some of them to go back to the stigmatized life of prostitution all over again.<sup>22</sup> This leads one to question whether or not attitudes towards the queer community are changing or whether or not governmental policies towards them is making any real difference. Srivastava and Singh remark that attitudes towards homosexuality is changing for the better in the urban sectors (129) but the question remains as to what extent people are willing to allow queer identifying individuals into their space.

This particular chapter aims to look into the conceptualization of the queer community in the social imagination of Gangtok. It will aim to look at how the members of the queer community perceive their notion of space and place and how they have created a space for themselves in society. It will also look into how the queer community

is perceived by those who do not identify as queer and to what extent they are willing to share their space with them. Space here refers to the physical space and the mental space.

### **Area of Study**

This study has been carried out in the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok, which falls under its East District. The reason behind the selection of Gangtok as the area of study is due to the narrative of Prajwal Parajuly's novel *Land Where I Flee* which primarily runs its course in Gangtok, the hometown of all the siblings in the novel. According to the All India Census of 2011, Gangtok accounts for a total population of 283,583 of whom 43.19% constitute the urban density strength.<sup>23</sup> The demographical figures of Gangtok are placed at 100,286<sup>24</sup> which shows that a significant number of people do have means of communicating with the rest of India and possibly the world. The perks of living in an urban area include access to better infrastructure than the rural areas, to information, active engagement with people from other parts of the state and with those from other parts of the country. However, this depends on several factors such as the subject's willingness to interact or the environment which may or may not be conducive to interact or engage with the facilities available in an urban zone. Therefore, in spite of the urban growth that Gangtok has witnessed in the past few decades, certain platforms to represent marginalized communities are yet to be realized.

As in other urban zones of the country, the queer community in Gangtok too finds itself 'pigeon-holed' into being individuals they are not comfortable with or with whom they do not identify. Traditional gender based roles push them further into closeting themselves. For some of these individuals, freedom of expression is felt more so in the bigger metros like Pune, Bengaluru and Mumbai.



## **Objectives of Study**

The primary objective of this study was to interrogate queer space in Gangtok. When one might question what aspect of queer space was taken into consideration then the spaces included would be the physical space or geographical space occupied and demarcated by people which would include concrete structures like classrooms, living space like bedrooms, hospital wards, office space, restaurants, pubs, dance clubs, hotels and other tangible spaces. They also include the non-tangible mental spaces that people segregate for themselves. Often, transgression of such a space might generate all kinds of responses because part of it is also a very private space where the individuals can be themselves. The entanglement of the physical space with the mental space is a complex phenomenon too. The objectives of this study have been listed as,

- How do the queer individuals conceptualize their space?
- To what extent is there a form of awareness about these individuals or their rights?
- Are they taken as a stigma by Gangtok society?
- How important a role does tradition play as far as the individual expression of the queer community is concerned?
- What are the limits to the 'permissible' social spaces in Gangtok?
- How have the queer individuals found their place in society?

## **Research Questions**

The primary research question for this study was to interrogate the social space occupied by the queer community in Gangtok, Sikkim. As there is no formal platform or

organization to represent them, it becomes crucial to understand how they have created a space for themselves in society.

There is a wide chasm between what is considered as tradition and traditionalism. While tradition would refer to the practices and beliefs which have been carried on from generation to generation across time and space, traditionalism insists on a certain way of seeing. It refers to the strict adherence to age-old stereotypical ideas and concepts in the face of changing times. It is a refusal to acknowledge change and is marked by exclusivity. The insistence on adhering to tradition especially traditional gender based roles and how it affects the lives of queer individuals needs to be examined.

## **Methods**

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were carried out leaving most of the questions open ended so that the participants could have the liberty to express themselves as they wished. The interviews ran to about 80-90 minutes on average depending upon the respondents' desire to express themselves. To fulfil the task of pursuing the objectives and to get well-balanced results, participants were formed into two groups. They included those who identified as queer and those who did not.

### **Questionnaires**

#### **Queer Identifying Group**

1 Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

Age:

Occupation:

Background:

Family:

- 2 Gangtok is developing as an urban sphere day by day. Constant movement of people, information and lifestyles is occurring. Living in Gangtok, working here, engaging with people on a daily basis, can you tell me about your basic understanding of 'queer' or LGBTIA+?
- 3 Of the following words, which term(s) represent how you feel about yourself? ('Straight'/Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Intersex, Asexual, or any other term that you associate yourself with)
- 4 How would you view your gender identity? (Man/Boy, Woman/Girl, Transgender, Agender, Gender Non-conformist, Queer, Queen or any other term you associate yourself with)
- 5 When did you first realize that you were comfortable with your identity?
- 6 Are your family and friends in the knowledge about your feelings?
- 7 Would you be comfortable expressing your identity in the public space?
- 8 Have you ever faced any form of discrimination that has made you feel less comfortable about yourself and more guarded against the world?
- 9 Have you ever felt like you have been pigeon holed(put in a box) by society in Gangtok to behave in a certain manner or do you perhaps fear that someday you may be pushed to do so?
- 10 Would you consider yourself a religious or even a spiritual person? (If yes, have you ever found that some ideas that are preached are in conflict with what you

believe in about your gender identity and sexuality?) (If not, have you found that some ideas that are preached are in conflict with what you believe in about your gender identity and sexuality?)

- 11 Have you lived anywhere else besides Gangtok? (If so, how do your experiences differ in terms of the expression of your self-identity when living in Gangtok and elsewhere?)
- 12 Do you think that being born in a privileged or non privileged environment has affected your self-expression? (Privilege-not just monetarily but also having access to the basic amenities such as internet for information...lack of privilege could also mean living in a place that does not have the means or infrastructure to support one's sense of identity.)
- 13 What do you think is preventing people from "coming out" in Gangtok?
- 14 Do you feel the necessity of an organization or a formal platform to represent yourself or the community?
- 15 Are you in touch with other people of the LGBTIA+ community who share similar experiences such as you here in Gangtok?
- 16 How have you created a space for yourselves?
- 17 Have you reached out to anybody from the community or have you ever helped anybody to be "comfortable" with their sexuality or gender identity?
- 18 Is there anything you would like to share?

### **Non-Queer Identifying Group**

1. Tell me about yourself.

Age:

Occupation:

Background:

Family:

2. Of the following words, which term(s) represent how you feel about yourself?  
(Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Asexual, Intersex, etc.)
3. Which of the following words describe your gender identity? (Man, Woman, Transgender, Gender-Nonconforming, Third Gender, Agender and others)
4. How would you view the relationship between your gender identity and sexual orientation?
5. Have you ever encountered or know a person who identifies as LGBTIA+?
6. What are the terms **You** would generally use to address a person who identifies as one? Do you know of the local terms associated with them?
7. Can you tell me about your basic understanding of 'queer' or LGBTIA+?
8. Would you consider a member of the LGBTIA+ as a stigma?
9. What aspect of an LGBTIA+ individual would you consider a stigma or taboo?
10. What do you think are the social factors that have shaped your opinion of the LGBTIA+ individuals?
11. Do you associate a person's appearance and their behaviour with their sexual orientation?
12. Do you think people are born 'queer'/ LGBTIA+?
13. Do you think that a foreign intervention has made them so?
14. If a member of your family came out as queer or a close friend of yours decided to tell you that they identify as LGBTIA+, how would you deal with the issue?

15. Are you comfortable being around or living with an LGBTIA+ individual?
16. Do you think they deserve rights like everyone else?
17. Do you think LGBTIA+ is something new to society here in Gangtok?
18. Would you think it is okay for LGBTIA+ individuals to marry each other and live as a couple in Gangtok society?
19. How open do you think is Gangtok society at large in the reception of LGBTIA+ individuals?
20. Do you think the government should do more to protect the interests of these individuals?
21. Are you aware of any of the policies made by the government for these individuals?
22. Do you think that it is necessary for schools and other social institutions to modify their systems to educate people more about LGBTIA+ issues?
23. Would you like to share something?

### **Sampling**

For this particular study, the respondents were recruited through random sampling and snowball sampling. Random sampling may be defined as “a part of the sampling technique in which each sample has an equal probability of being chosen. A sample chosen randomly is meant to be an unbiased representation of the total population.”<sup>25</sup>

This technique was employed in the enlistment of participants who belonged to the “sexual majority” or the non-queer identifying group. A total of five male participants, all of whom identified as heterosexual men, took part in the study. Aged between 24-33 years, four of them were born elsewhere in Sikkim out of whom two of them were

currently based in Gangtok while the other two had spent time in Gangtok. One participant was born and based in Gangtok. Out of the five respondents, two were pursuing their research in higher education while two of them had completed their masters degree. One of them was working as a government employee in Gangtok.

For the “sexual minority” or the queer-identifying group, exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling was employed. Snowball sampling has been defined as “a non-probability (non random) sampling method used when characteristics to be possessed by samples are rare and difficult to find.”(Dudovskiy, 2017) Exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling has been defined as the case where a subject provides multiple referrals. (ibid)

Two male participants who identified as both gay and at times bisexual men were involved in the study. Aged at 22 and 28 years, both the interviewees were born in Gangtok and were currently based in Gangtok too. One of them was involved with an organization while the other person was venturing into the entrepreneurial world.

## **Procedure**

Recruiting the referrals of the non queer identifying group took place via posts on social networking sites which included Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp. The posts were made public on 04 January, 2018. Out of 76 “likes” generated on Facebook, 53 “likes” on Instagram and an average of 16-18 people viewing the uploaded post on Whatsapp for seven continuous days, 5 people were taken as part of the sample. A total number of 11 people had expressed their desire to be interviewed initially which included 9 males and 2 females but owing to certain factors like the paucity of time, being located out of the state and a change of mind in being interviewed led to the sample being narrowed down to its

present size. The five interviews were conducted from 06 to 12 January, 2018. Each interview lasted between 80-90 minutes. In order to prevent any bias on the part of the researcher and to be clear about the gender and sexual orientation of the respondents, the same set of questions were placed at two and three for the “sexual majority” group and questions three and four of the “sexual minority”. Moreover, placards were placed before the participants of both the groups in order to make it easier for them to identify their gender and sexual identity.

Regarding the sexual minority, both the respondents were introduced by a mutual friend. Contact was made with the first respondent over phone and the interview was held on 11 January, 2018. As the entire interview could not be completed since the respondent was on his lunch break, five remaining questions were answered over email. The interview with the second respondent was conducted on 31 January, 2018. Initial contact was made with him through Whatsapp after which he agreed to feature in the study. The interview was conducted via Whatsapp.

The interviews were recorded on a Zoom H5 Handy Recorder. Prior to the interview, the researcher ensured to orient the participants about the ongoing study. The permission of the respondents was sought before the recording. During the course of the recording it was found that some of the participants were uncomfortable or conscious of the machine recording their voice. However, as soon as the device was stopped, they began to express their opinions with better ease. Also, the respondents were asked to express themselves freely in Nepali or English; whichever of the two they were comfortable with. This was done to allow them spontaneity and more room to articulate their voices. As a result, 80% of the subjects employed both Nepali and English in their



interviews. It was also observed among one of the respondents that while the recording device was switched on, the person would express himself in English but after the device was switched off, the person would revert to Nepali.

### **Ethical Concerns**

The interviews were conducted only after seeking the permission of the participants to record and transcribe them. Assurance was also given that the interviews would be confidential and that no part of them would be sabotaged or misused that would cause them harm or regret later. All the participants were informed about the purpose of the study being conducted lest there should be confusion about it. The timings and location for the interviews were fixed at the convenience of the respondents. Moreover, they were also told that they had the right to ask the interviewee to stop recording at any point or to skip a question they found unsuitable or were uncomfortable answering.

### **Results**

For both the queer and the non-queer group interviews, the thematic analysis of data technique (Braun and Clark, 2006) was employed. Recordings were transcribed and patterns were looked into.

#### **Non-Queer Identifying Group**

##### **Ambiguity in Understanding Queer or LGBTIA+**

Most of the participants had little knowledge or awareness about the queer community. “Queer” was a new term for them and they were more familiar with LGBTIA+. Out of this, they were aware about Lesbian (L), Gay (G), Transgender (T) but not Bisexual (B),

Intersex (I), Asexual (A) and other identities under the queer spectrum. While they all had encountered or knew people who identified as queer, they only included gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals and transgenders. The latter were encountered outside the state or were read of in the news and social media. From the respondents, 80% of them remarked that when encountering *hijras*, they were not comfortable being around them. One respondent remarked that earlier, meeting one would incite fear in him but over time he had got used to them. However, it was expressed by the participants that societal beliefs about the transgender community had seeped into their conscience which had led them to hold such beliefs about them. There was an ambiguity in the usage of local terms to describe them too. “Chakka” is a derogative term generally used for gay men or transgender people. One respondent said that he used the term for gay men, lesbian women as well as transgenders. Apart from the decision taken by Kochi Metro to hire transgenders, watching few films with queer themes and posts on social media, the respondents had not had much exposure to the queer community.

### **Space for queer individuals among family and close friends**

Most of the participants expressed a willingness to interact and engage with queer identifying individuals even if they were part of their family or close friends circle. On being asked if his partner came out as a lesbian and what his reaction would be, one respondent replied that he would try and win her back but would let her go if she relented. When he was asked further if he had a son who came out as gay to him, he said that he would not accept him on the grounds that the family’s name had to be upheld. Another respondent remarked that if such a situation occurred it would depend on the

circumstances but he firmly believed that queer individuals had the right to express themselves freely.

### **Belief in traditional gender based roles**

While all the participants believed that individuals in society, whether they identified as a man or woman or even beyond the binary of man-woman, there was a contradiction in this because it was found that they felt a man had a certain role to play in society such as being responsible or looking after his family. The same applied for a woman.

### **Lack of space for the queer community in Gangtok**

The participants expressed the view that there is a lack of space for the queer community or that they are unaware of the spaces available for them in Gangtok. They felt that even if they did desire to be open about their identities, Gangtok society would not provide room to express themselves. They did feel that Gangtok followed a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and that in comparison to the “rest of India”, people in Gangtok were more tolerant towards the community. One participant expressed the view that the government had not created enough opportunities for the queer group too especially with regard to the ongoing state tourism festival at the time of the interview. He felt that perhaps the government should have given them a slot at the cultural programmes. He thought it would have generated awareness and encouraged the community to be more open about their identities. It was expressed by the participants that the queer community too held the responsibility of being open about their identities which would facilitate the removal of stigmas surrounding them and also enable the government to take better measures for their empowerment.

## **Social Stigma on the Queer Community**

While the participants articulated that they did not see the members of the queer community as a stigma, they did acknowledge the fact that society in Gangtok does view them as a stigma. They felt that Gangtok was a small place where information could be disseminated easily within the social circles therefore people were more guarded about their identities. It was observed among 60% of the participants that whenever tabooed terms such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “Chakka”, and “homosexual” had to be used; there was a change in voice modulation with the respondents speaking in hushed tones. They did stress on the fact that the queer community had to come out in order to remove the stigmas around them and that the people who did not identify as queer also had to shed their inhibitions about the community.

## **Queer-Identifying Group**

### **Gangtok society does not provide space for queer individuals**

One of the concerns expressed by the participants was that Gangtok does not provide enough space for queer individuals to express themselves. They felt that the citizens of Gangtok had not been exposed enough to accept the idea of queer even though a significant number of people who identified as queer lived among them. With regard to the family and friends circle, one of the participants stated that his parents, siblings and close friends are in the knowledge about his identity but when he first came out in the eleventh grade, his parents did not take it too well. He said,

I had come out to my parents in the 11th grade, which is kind of tragic (laughs nervously) It didn't go well at all and I was made to understand that this was all a,

all a, you know...like a hoax...and it's all untrue and, and I was beaten down to it, like, in the sense, this idea was forced down my throat through various physical ways and you know, a lot of ways, they tried to ensure that this does not develop more. So, I pretended that it was not developing anymore and since I was still isolated, that freedom I was given, so, which is the reason why, in fact, like that whole episode of my parents, uh, like being harsh with me, physically abusive and mentally exhaustive to me kind of helped me...it did not help me in a good way, it did not de-motivate me because it made me realize that okay, I'm alone and I have to fight for myself and that's the way and that's how it went. LUCKY that I went to Paris. (Respondent7, 2018)

The second respondent claimed that only his close friends and a cousin sister knew about his identity. His family was not aware about his feelings. He said that he did not want himself or his family to face any backlash in Sikkim. He stated that while he had not faced any form of discrimination, opening up to Gangtok society was an “impossible task” (Respondent 8). He said,

Regarding me being open about myself it's an impossible task whilst I am in Sikkim. The people here are illiterate with regards to the LGBT community. And I have my family's name attached so...I don't want them to face the backlash. Not that being open is needed per se. As (sic) I am happy in my secret love life.

(Respondent 7,2018)

### **Facing discrimination and being victims of bullying**

Respondent 7 and Respondent 8 had different experiences. While Respondent 7 claimed that he had been a victim of bullying and faced discrimination when living outside of

Sikkim as well as in his school days when he would prefer skipping rope to other activities “fit for boys” his age, Respondent 8 claimed that he had not faced any form of discrimination because he was not “effeminate” like some other gay men and that he “blended” well in society.

### **Repression from Social Stigmas surrounding Queer**

Both the participants reported that identifying as queer or LGBTIA+ is taken as a social stigma in Gangtok. Respondent 8 felt that the neighbouring areas of Darjeeling and Sikkim had “more holding with regards to queer relationship. The people there are more open minded and accepting.” (Respondent 8, 2018) Social stigmas and the pressure to perform appears to have pushed certain people who identify as queer to behave as society expects of them. Both reported that they have come across several government employees in Sikkim in their 40s who identify as gay men but have gotten married and are with children. Respondent 7 said that some of these men have told him that they do not identify with who they are forced to become in society.

### **Experience of being ‘pigeon-holed’ in Gangtok society**

Both the participants felt ‘pigeon-holed’ by the society they lived in. Respondent 7 remarked that he felt “pigeon-holed” in the way he dressed and the way he carried himself which was why he was completely different in Pune and France where he was previously based. He said,

I did not grow up with an open idea that being gay is also normal. It was unspoken of that being straight is the normal way to be in life, so, which is the reason why I tried being straight (laughs nervously). And I tried falling in love

and I kissed, uh, I had my experiences with women and it's just that in general none of the women that I was with was something that I was so happy with.

(Respondent 7,2018)

### **Privilege makes a difference with regard to one's gender identification and sexual expression**

Respondent 7 remarked that privilege plays a huge role in his case which has helped liberate him from the shackles of society that generally bind people. He also felt that one's position of privilege could be used to benefit the less privileged as in the case of Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil of Rajpipla in Gujarat. Respondent 8 replied that the access to the internet is "the only privilege that affects queer people because we're born this way."(Respondent 8, 2018) Both the respondents were in agreement that the internet also paves the way to engage with other members of the queer community. Dating apps like Grindr and other social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram have enabled them to reach out to people with similar ideas, experiences and tendencies as them. They said that there are groups on Facebook which remain hidden but actually function as a huge support system for the queer community in the region. In this manner they have created a space for themselves on the virtual plane.

### **Experiencing greater freedom of expression outside one's hometown, Gangtok**

Respondent 7 had lived outside of Gangtok since his eleventh grade. He had spent time in New Delhi, Pune, Mumbai, Paris and Pondicherry. He remarked that each of these places helped him grow as an individual because he had made friends with a wide circle of people who supported the cause and felt like him. He said, "Living elsewhere is the only

way I could have been so vocal about how I feel.” (Respondent 7, 2018) In the case of Respondent 8, he too had spent time working in New Delhi and Gurugram and he said that living there had given him both “similar and different” experiences; similar because these places are still part of India and discretion about one’s identity persists there too and different because the LGBTIA+ crowd was more open and aware about safe sex.

### **Creating a space through art and literature**

Respondent 7 remarked that art and literature formed a significant part of his life. They had helped him in coming to terms with his identity. Reading Yukio Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask* helped him recognise himself. He also stated that since forming a community would take a while, art could serve as a means to generate awareness in Gangtok about the community. He said he had tried posting small notes across MG Marg, which lies at the very heart of Gangtok. These notes had messages which talked about the experience of being queer. Respondent 7 further stated that the open mic sessions organized by Rachna Books, where he could perform his poetry, served as a good platform towards launching a queer space.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the study conducted it was found that while there is a virtual space in existence for the queer community in Gangtok, in the physical plane, there is still an urgency for a platform or an organization to be launched to safeguard the interests of the queer community. The sexual majority do not consider queer people as criminals or deviants in society but they seem to be willing to allow them only within certain limits of their personal space. The non-queer identifying group does not possess much awareness about



the queer group while the queer group feel that Gangtok is not willing to accept individuals who identify as LGBTIA+. Art and social media have played an important role in helping queer individuals come to terms with themselves and connecting with the rest of the queer family outside the state. While it may take a while for the queer community to be completely accepted into the fold of Gangtok society, the positive responses from the non-queer identifying group show that change is happening for the better.

### Chapter III

#### Reading Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee*

##### Introduction

Space is personal, space is political. Interrogating the profundity of the idea and manifestation of space is no simple task. Lefebvre points out that philosophy has moved beyond the threshold of identifying space as a matter of geometrical proportions and now comprehends it in terms of the social, political and psychological spheres. (Lefebvre, 2009) Space exists as a concrete version of its abstract self on the physical plane. This is in occurrence owing to the deep seated attachments we foster with our notions of personal and political space. Space, in a way, has contributed to widening the fissures between people. When groups of people cluster and identify a geographical or a mental space as their own, there is a tendency for stereotypes and prejudices to occur since the designated space will have been formed out of a commonality. This leads to a demarcation which may or may not be breached. These delineations have not only created several clusters in society but they have been the cause of various forms of communal and separatist riots. The holocaust stands as a grim reminder of the extent to which people driven by their ideologies can go. The mishandling of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, which was called a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”<sup>26</sup> by the United Nations, also testifies to the fact that the walls of “cultural ghettos” we have built around ourselves grow higher and steeper by the year.

The question remains as to how such barriers may be broken through. Government deliberations, peace talks, change in governmental policies, change in classroom pedagogy, scientific breakthroughs may all add up to the mountain of efforts

being made to resolve crises arising from such an issue. In addition to all these, the ancient art of storytelling and later fiction writing may also prove to breach the cocoon we have woven around ourselves.

Elif Shafak, the renowned Turkish author, while delivering a talk on “The Politics of Fiction”<sup>27</sup>, remarked that storytelling is a means to “transcend the cultural ghettos.”<sup>28</sup> She said, “Stories cannot demolish frontiers but they can punch holes in our mental walls. And through these holes we can get a glimpse of the other and sometimes even like what we see.”<sup>29</sup> Fiction avails to a wide reception and it holds an immeasurable power to move the listener or reader. It provides room to engage in a willing suspension of disbelief, that is, the reader is temporarily plummeted into a world where they can put aside their inhibitions and qualms about the subject at hand and for once, believe in the beauty of the subject’s unravelling. Fiction possesses the capability to convey a message in an approachable manner and quite often serves as a voice of authority and a means of escape taking the listener or reader as well as the author or speaker to different places when they have nowhere else to go.

This is not to say that fiction is not coloured by any agenda. The approach to fiction with a suspension of one’s disbelief makes it easier for the hegemonic class to instil ideas that interpellate the ‘individual’ into a ‘subject’ (Althusser, 1994). Taking from Antonio Gramsci’s idea of cultural hegemony, Louis Althusser in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” identifies the ideological state apparatus as a tool of repression through means of ideology as opposed to the repressive state apparatus which functions through coercion. He says,

I shall call Ideological State Apparatus a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions....we can, for the moment regard the following institutions as Ideological State Apparatuses ( the order in which I have listed them has no particular significance):

- the religious ISA ( the system of the different Churches);
- the educational ISA ( the system of the different public and private ‘Schools’);
- the family ISA;
- the legal ISA;
- the political ISA ( the political system, including the different Parties);
- the trade-union ISA;
- the communications ISA ( press, radio and television, etc.);
- the cultural ISA ( Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.).

...the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by *ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. Thus Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc., to ‘discipline’ not only their shepherds but also their flocks. (Althusser, 152-153)

Ideological suppression begins from as early as the elementary stage of a child’s growth. This may occur in the form of stories that are narrated to instil ‘good values’ and build the child’s character. In an instance taken from Vishnu Sharma’s Panchatantra on the

ensorship of same sex love, Vanita and Kidwai comment that there are some discrepancies in the tale of the ape and the crocodile that has been passed down to the present day. In the earlier versions, the crocodile's wife expresses jealousy at the close friendship between the ape and her husband and threatens to fast unto death unless he delivers the ape's heart to her. The heart being the seat of emotion and passion, the crocodile refuses initially only to give in later. Vanita points at a line taken from the story where the wife accuses the husband of being in a sexual liaison with his friend the ape, "Again, if the creature is truly a male ape, as you say, what kind of affection is this that you feel for it?" (Vanita and Kidwai, 52) While she initially suspects the ape of being female, her remark upon their friendship opens an avenue for the possibility of same sex love being in existence in Indian Vedic society then. Later versions which omit this point testify to the erasure of same sex relationship or other queer discourses from children's literature. This could be in part due to the efforts being made by society to preserve the "innocence" of children by preventing taboos such as homosexuality being discussed in their literature. This omission of queer individuals, their behaviour and expression from the domain of children's literature proves that Indian Hindu society, unconsciously recognises the existence of this community but seeing them as a threat to the normative, that is heterosexual relationships between cis gendered men and women, which they deem 'essential' for reproduction and the advancement of civilization, they seek to suppress them.

Liminality is a phenomenon termed by Homi Bhabha, which is the process of creating a unique space for oneself that seeks to challenge the established norm. Postcolonial studies identifies the liminal space as one from where the hybrid individual

emerges who not only appropriates and abrogates the colonisers' culture but also brings in remnants of their own indigenous culture making for a phenomenon that in time destroys the old world order ascertained by the ruling faction. The liminal space may also be used to describe the unique space that women authors have sought to carve out for themselves over time. Virginia Woolf, in her "A Room of One's Own", talks about the necessity of space and money for a woman to help her bring her artistic sensibilities to fruition. If she is given her own space she can not only realize her true potential but she can turn a system against itself because she will be writing from the point of view of the suppressed, the spoken for and the marginalized. The diary entries made by Anne Frank, while living under Nazi controlled Germany, proved to be one of the many voices in literature which testified to the many atrocities committed against the Jewish population by the Nazis. The fact that such a vital work survived a regime that had sought to ban all forms of literature is proof that it holds the ability to speak against the very system that seeks to manipulate it.

The genre of queer literature is not a new invention. One has only to go back to the love poems of Sappho in Greek literature or even closer home to the parallel narratives of the Mahabharata to find that the motif of queer expression and behaviour was not an uncommon feature. Although positive reception of queer themed writing is still in its nascent stage, literature remains one of the few mediums where queer expression finds a space of its own. Not only has it served as a means to articulate what remains unarticulated in the social space but it also replicates and supports the cause of the community. By replication, one may understand the process by which literature imitates life by fictionalising the politics of queer which traverses across the personal and

social spheres. Such a scope has accentuated the increase in the production of LGBTIA+ literature over the years, both in India and the rest of the world.

Strongly affirming that “gay literature is firmly out of the closet,”<sup>30</sup> in India, Urmi Chanda-Vaz says,

Even as same-sex couples in India struggle to gain legal recognition, in literature they are the heroes and heroines....The voices are many and the list is long, each telling a different story of love, sensitivity, sexuality, and everything in between....there is change and inventiveness too. The point of being different yet normal is being driven home in different ways.<sup>31</sup>

However, in spite of the breakthroughs being made in LGBTIA+ literature, it would be a generalization to state that this phenomenon applies to the whole of the country. Following the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union in 1975, its capital Gangtok, has over the years, witnessed a steady urban growth involving a mingling of the old and the new. The increase in urban growth has meant not only infrastructural growth but also the mass influx of people from other parts of Sikkim and the neighbouring areas of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong as well as from the neighbouring state of Bihar. As per the census of India 2011, the East district of Sikkim, where Gangtok is located, accounts for a total population of 283,583 of whom 43.19% constitute the urban populace<sup>32</sup>. The demographics of Gangtok stand at 100,286<sup>33</sup> which implies that a large number of people have access to means of communicating with the rest of India. Living in an urban area means having access to information, better infrastructure than the rural areas, active engagement with people from other parts of the state and possibly with those from other parts of the country. However, this is conditional, depending on factors such

as the subject's willingness to interact or the circumstances under which they may interact or engage with the facilities available in an urban zone. Therefore, in spite of the urban growth that Gangtok has witnessed in the past few decades, certain platforms to represent marginalized communities are yet to be realized. The 2011 census of India lists the total transgender population at 487,803 with Uttar Pradesh accounting for the highest strength at 137,465. Kerala has the highest literacy rate among the transgender community with 94.00%. The total population of Sikkim stands at 6.11 lakhs out of which the transgender demographics depict a figure of 126. Out of this number, 14 include children up to six years of age; 9 belong to the Scheduled Castes community; 37 belong to the Scheduled Tribes community and their literacy rate is at 65.18%.<sup>34</sup> While this figure may not necessarily represent the entire transgender community especially the children aged up to six years, it is an indicator that the community is present in Sikkim if not completely visible. The Sikkim Gazetteer of 2013 however, depicts a different picture because when listing the population, it has not included the transgender population. Earlier the 'other' category was kept for the transgender community but the report in the table given in page 51 (see table 1) shows that this category includes males and females only. Perhaps the fact that they have published the census from 2006 when the transgender community was not included in the All India Census could be the reason for this exclusion. Nevertheless it is hoped that in the next official census of Sikkim the community will be included.

The transgender community make up a significant part of the queer community. Like everywhere else, in India too, they are constantly battling for trans-visibility. Being visible is the first step towards making a community's presence felt. Not only does it



imply recognition of the community, it also means access to the policies and schemes laid down by the government. It stands as a gateway to jobs and benefits that are generally denied to the transgender community because of the social stigma that surrounds them.

**TABLE 4.5 : COMMUNITYWISE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION**

Community	Total Population	% Distribution	Male	Female	Sex Ratio
Bhutia	76070	13.08	38891	37179	956
Lepcha	45239	7.78	22945	22294	972
Tamang	39457	6.78	20439	19018	930
Limboo	56650	9.74	29343	27307	931
Bahun	40110	6.90	20213	19897	984
Chhettri	71836	12.35	37103	34733	936
Pradhan/Newar	21636	3.72	10981	10655	970
Rai	78651	13.52	40122	38529	960
Mangar	15702	2.70	8171	7531	922
Gurung	34344	5.91	17570	16774	955
Sunuwar/Mukhia	3042	0.52	1609	1433	891
Thami	453	0.08	238	215	903
Jogi	490	0.08	259	231	892
Dewan	176	0.03	91	85	934
Bhujel	3563	0.61	1807	1756	972
Kami	24767	4.26	12640	12127	959
Damai	12322	2.12	6223	6099	980
Sarki	1151	0.20	561	590	1052
Majhi	506	0.09	259	247	954
Sanyasi/Giri	1337	0.23	716	621	867
Others	54044	9.29	32671	21373	654
State	581546	100	302852	278694	920

Source: State Socio Economic Census 2006.

Table 1: Gazetteer of Sikkim, Home Department, Government of Sikkim, 2013<sup>35</sup>

It basically involves carving out a space for them from the very social space from which they are excluded. The fact that the gazetteer published by the Sikkimese government involves an erasure of the transgender community in Sikkim is an indication of the lack of trans-visibility in the state and this is a matter that needs to be urgently addressed. In accordance with the Umbrella Scheme for Empowerment of Transgender

Community under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, the Social Justice, Empowerment and Welfare department of the Government of Sikkim has accommodated scholarships and other welfare benefits for them but till date no claims have been made.<sup>36</sup> This could be due to the lack of access or awareness about government schemes or even an unwillingness to come out in the open. The first Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014, was introduced as a Private Member's Bill and was passed by the Rajya Sabha enabling transgender people to the right of self-identification thereby allowing them access to various government schemes on the basis of self-identification as a transgender individual. The controversial Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill of 2016 has complicated matters as it invades into the very private space of transgender individuals when the Right to Privacy has been made a Fundamental Right as of August 24, 2017.<sup>37</sup> Some of the clauses of this Bill that "decimate" the transgender community into "third rate" individuals are:

(i) "transgender person" means a person who is-

(A) neither wholly female nor wholly male; or

(B) a combination of female or male; or

(C) neither female nor male, and

whose sense of gender identification does not match with the gender assigned to that person at the time of birth, and includes trans-men and tran-women, persons with intersex variations and gender-queers...

5. A transgender person may make an application to the District

Magistrate for issuing a certificate of identity as a transgender person....

Followed by the clauses mentioned above, the Bill further states that a District Screening Committee consisting of a medical officer, a district social welfare officer, a representative of the transgender community, a psychiatrist or a psychologist and an officer of the appropriate government to 'screen' and 'identify' the person as a transgender individual will be required. Not just that, in the case of minors, it is mentioned that parents or guardians will be responsible in identifying them as such.<sup>39</sup>

At a time when creating a space for the queer community is essential, such bills, in spite of their intentions, seem to create further obstructions instead of clearing them. Many of the members of the transgender community including activists feel that the bill seeks to bind them within the male-female, man-woman binary when in fact they are seeking to carve their own space as transgenders or even as gender nonconformists. Moreover, critics argue that this bill, in bringing the binary into the fold, presents male-female, man-woman as normal thereby contributing to the whole normalization process which queer and gender activists seek to break. (Siva, 2016) Identifying the space of the queer community is crucial and in places like Sikkim where access to information and other infrastructure is still developing, it is essential that room be created for such a space to grow. In the midst of this quagmire, literature appears to have served as a platform for the queer community to have a voice particularly through the writings of Prajwal Parajuly in his novel *Land Where I Flee*. Of the few voices present in Sikkim which advocate for queer rights or even speak from such a perspective, Parajuly's novel is perhaps one of the first which assumes a queer angle highlighting the lives of queer individuals living in and out of the city of Gangtok. Employing the medium of Indian English, a language that itself was born from the liminal space, with a frequent usage of Nepali colloquialisms,

one might observe that the novel navigates across the deep oceans of the Indian-Nepali diaspora and spatial dimensions of gender and sexuality enabling multiple readings of it. In the course of the research being done, it was found that till date no publications have been made in Nepali writings in India nor in 'Indian-Nepali-English' that deal with the queer community in Sikkim or the neighbouring areas of Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kalimpong or Siliguri which are the areas that the novel looks into. The fact that Parajuly's is perhaps the only visible novel to take such a perspective highlights a larger issue at hand which is the lack of mediums to express queerness or simply to talk queer. India's neighbouring country, Nepal, paints a different portrait as queer writings there are gradually making their foray into the world of Nepali writing. Some of these include Usha Sherchan's short story *Anapekchit Bari Pahiro* from her collection, *Tesro Rang* and *Gaurav Ko Utkarsh* published by the Blue Diamond Society of Nepal.

This chapter makes a detailed analysis of the representations of queer and queer spaces in the novel. Taking several issues it will seek to examine how the novel serves as site or space of articulation for the queer community in Gangtok. It will seek to understand the effect of displacement on personalities like Prasanti who identify as transgender as well as how they have turned their stigma against itself. Moreover, it will also look into the baggage of traditionalism that seems to wear down characters like Agastya who leads an entirely different life elsewhere. Thereafter, it will also involve taking a class perspective to look into the lives of people like Prasanti and Agastya.

First published by Quercus in 2014, the prologue of Prajwal Parajuly's first novel, *Land Where I Flee*, primarily locates itself in Gangtok where four siblings gather to celebrate the *chaurasi* or the 84<sup>th</sup> birthday of their grandmother, Chitralkha

Neupaney. The prologue opens with a description of the prized garment factory owned by the matriarch of the Neupaney family, Chitralkha Neupaney. Resembling a heritage hotel more than a garment factory (Parajuly, 1), this monument stands as a silent testimony to the bygone days, an edifice of the past refusing to move on with the rest of the world but the advertisement boards of models in traditional attire and the polished copper plate which flanks its entrance reading “NEUPANEY APPAREL INC., KALIMPONG, GORKHALAND” (ibid, 2), speak of the change in tide that time has brought in to this silent witness of history. In a way, the changes around this building reflect the changes that the matriarch has to come to terms with as her landmark 84<sup>th</sup> birthday approaches.

At the very outset it becomes clear that Chitralkha is dominating, manipulative and a traditionalist to the core. One might observe that the position of the garment factory corresponds to her character. Like the factory, she has withstood the test of time through a tumultuous period in the hills of Darjeeling and is on the verge of commemorating her victory over life and all her adversities. Yet, as the plot of the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that she has paid a heavy price but her losses do not seem to have derailed her from her path towards safeguarding the Neupaney name. It is apparent that her adamant nature has cost her much; the uneasy relationship with her four grandchildren being perhaps the biggest strain on her. She is a traditionalist, believing in the ‘purity’ of Brahmin blood. When her granddaughter Bhagwati elopes with Ram, who is a Damaai, a man of a low caste, she cuts her off for having tarnished the family name and their ‘pure’ blood. This in turn leads her to find the most suitable match for her remaining grandchildren. Manasa, a promising Oxford graduate and a Deloitte consultant, is married

off to an ancient, politically linked but now powerless family in Nepal while her search for the 'perfect' wife for her grandson Agastya proves somewhat futile as he is least interested in getting married to a woman and instead prefers his closeted life as a gay man in America. Her fourth grandchild, Ruthwa, ends up as the black sheep of the family as he writes about her supposed rape thereby making her lose face in society. Her efforts to control the lives of her grandchildren backfire because Manasa, unhappy in her marriage and forced to play nurse to her ailing father-in-law, rebels against her. On the occasion of *Tika* during *Dashain*, when Chitrlekha looks forward to applying the vermilion rice *tika* on her new grandson-in-law, Manasa declares that she is on her period. She insists that either her grandmother applies on both or on none at all. Chitrlekha is forced to relent to her granddaughter's obstinacy and later, in a way of rubbing salt onto her wounds, Manasa declares that she had not been on her period at all.

Chitrlekha's manipulative tendencies and business acumen is seen in the first chapter of the novel, "The Problem with Reunions" when Kamal Moktan, the leader of the Gorkha Jana-Shakti Morcha, the current party spearheading the Gorkhaland movement in the hills, pays her a visit for her financial backing. She skilfully manages to strike a bargain with him. In return for her favours, the party is led to make it mandatory for the hill citizens to wear the traditional Nepali attire to instil a spirit of "oneness" among them. She specifies that the clothes are to be specifically supplied from her factory for the said purpose. (Parajuly, 13) This is not to say that she does not possess a heart or lacks goodwill. She is a protective grandmother and provides a place for Prasanti, in her home.

Chitrlekha's looming presence and her dominating personality foreshadows the life of her grandson Agastya, who is brought to the reader's vicinity as a closeted gay man living in the USA with his lover Nicholas. An oncologist by profession, Agastya enjoys much freedom and privilege in relation to his sister Bhagwati who lives a few hundred miles away from him knee-deep in debt and poverty. However, his freedom and privilege do not prevent him from being highly guarded about his life. While America may have given him the privilege to express himself, he carries on with his relationship with Nicholas in secret, hidden from the prying eyes of his grandmother back home and his sister Bhagwati.

Agastya's partner, Nicholas, comes from a background that is in stark contrast to Agastya's. While Agastya is an upper caste "Upadhyay Baahun" (Parajuly, 25), Nicholas or Nicky "belonged to a broken one from rural Ohio, a descendant of a line of rednecks who could barely trace their ancestry beyond two generations and among whom the divorce rate hovered precariously close to one hundred percent." (ibid, 25) The differences arising from the two worlds that these lovers belong to somehow unfortunately fail to absolve even as they strive to maintain their rocky relationship in USA and back home in Gangtok when Nicky decides to pay a surprise visit to Agastya. In spite of the efforts on both their parts, the weight of Agastya's emotional baggage weighs them down and they finally decide to part ways in the end.

A character whose presence is constantly felt in the novel is that of Prasanti. Born as Prasant Acharya in Kalimpong, she is said to have spent time in Siliguri and then Bombay, living and working with the transgender community there under a *guru* as a *chela*. Her sex reassignment surgery in Karnataka gives her a new leash of life. Instead of

going back to the slums of Bombay to engage in the sex trade like her *guru*, Prasanti runs away from the hospital in Karnataka post her surgery. It is said she “longed to be an individual. She craved the mainstream even if the mainstream was determined to shut her out.” It is while she is begging for alms on a train to Guwahati that she meets Chitrlekha Neupaney who takes her under her wing as a servant at her home in Gangtok. In a review of *Land Where I Flee* for DNA, Anam Rizvi quotes Prajwal Parajuly who says, “I decided to take all the taboo issues in the Indian subcontinent such as homosexuality, inter-caste marriages and eunuchs and have a blast with them.” (Rizvi, 2014)

At the surface, Parajuly’s novel appears as a harmless entity narrating the series of events that accompany a family reunion that would be tempestuous to say the least. However, beyond the phantasmagoric web that he places before the reader; beneath the exterior there actually lurk pressing issues that affect the daily lives of individuals across all spheres the world over. Echoing what has been mentioned earlier, *Land Where I Flee* serves as a platform to represent and speak for a community that exists at the margins, namely the queer community. In employing a medium that occupies a ‘respectable place’ in society, Parajuly has attempted to bring to light the issues faced by the queer community. Through his description of characters like Agastya and Prasanti as well as the looming presence of Chitrlekha in their lives, Parajuly deliberately brings them to the mainstream when the mainstream seeks to push them out. As a site of queer expression, the text highlights certain issues faced by the queer characters in the novel and by those who identify as queer in reality.



### **Repression of one's identity owing to stigma surrounding queer community**

If one is to visit the website of the Blue Diamond Society of Nepal, one will come across a passage from the “Serenity Prayer” by Reinhold Niebuhr on acceptance which reads, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” (Niebuhr) Through this message organizations such as the Blue Diamond Society highlight the most significant problem that the LGBTIA+ community faces, that of acceptance. By this, one would mean allowing the individual room to grow as they are without questioning their choices and their self-expression. Acceptance would mean acknowledging the individuality of another person as much as one would like one's individuality to be respected. In the case of the queer community, this does not happen very often owing to the stigmas surrounding them. As a result, the person is led to repress part of their true identity and exhibit other identities to the world. This is evident in the case of Agastyta at the very beginning of the novel as he is about to leave for India.

To leave New York was to leave an identity behind. And Agastyta had many identities. In Gangtok, he was the pressured orphan grandson of a woman who considered her other grandson long dead. In Pondicherry, he was the medical student proving that his belonging to Sikkim...wasn't the only reason he found his way into the prestigious Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research. In New York, he was the high-flying oncologist in a clandestine three-year relationship with a nurse who he sometimes suspected had gossiped about their affair with other nurses. Shedding on cloak and donning another as he travelled from place to place was second nature to Agastyta. (Parajuly, 26)

As a closeted member of the queer diaspora, it seems natural for Agastya to take on several identities. However, some of these are shed or repressed in order to accommodate him to his surroundings.

On the way to the airport, Agastya and Nicky enter into an argument about adopting a child, an issue that many same-sex couples contend with. While the relationship between Agastya and Nicky breaks barriers and destabilises the heteronormativity that the South Asian diaspora seeks to project, the fact that Agastya is unable to introduce Nicholas to his family as his boyfriend stands as a way of Parajuly critiquing the notion of “home” in diasporic discourse. Gayatri Gopinath observes the “home”,

...is a sacrosanct space of purity, tradition, and authenticity embodied by the figure of the “woman” who is enshrined at its center, and marked by patriarchal gender and sexual arrangements. (Gopinath, 14)

Nicholas does not fit into the requirements of a “home” even as he attempts to build one through the adoption of a child. Not just that, Agastya seeks to keep his relationship with Nicholas under wraps, knowing that they both come from two separate places and fearing the backlash it might create if he were to open up about them to his family. In this manner, no “room” is made for the relationship to develop any further which is why the two part ways in the end.

### **Turning a stigma against itself**

While Agastya veils his stigma behind his uptight demeanour back home in Gangtok and elsewhere too, Prasanti, the eunuch servant, turns her stigma against itself through her

loud and flamboyant nature. Her use of language shocks and provokes to the extent that it normalises the usage of such vocabulary in an otherwise conservative household. In the words of Ruthwa,

Prasanti got away with a lot. Her mouth, for example, could put a Khalpara pimp to shame.

The Nepali word for ‘butt’, *condo*, is often a bad word, straddling between grudging acceptance in some households and downright intolerance in others.

In the hierarchy of filthy words, it doesn’t rank as high as the Nepali terms for ‘vagina’, ‘whore’ and ‘penis’, but it’s still a word the Neupaneys wouldn’t use at home...

...Prasanti had no qualms about liberally sprinkling the word as noun- both common and proper- and adjective in her speech.

In the beginning, Aamaa scolded her, gave her dangerous looks and even boxed her ear, but when nothing could diminish Prasanti’s zeal for the word, my grandmother gave up.

*Condo* became the acceptable word at home which certainly appalled the relatives. (Parajuly, 105)

Prasanti manages to penetrate into the very heart of patriarchy that seeks to suppress people like her and creates a unique space for herself at Neupaney Oasis. This can be seen during the occasion of *Bhai Tika* when Prasanti enacts the role of both sister and brother. As she finishes with the rituals, the loud snap of her bra-strap as she places the monetary offerings she has received between them, serves as a resounding snap at the

face of patriarchy and the normative. Through her gesture, she emerges as a transcendent individual who breaks through the binary of male and female.

While her acceptance into the Neupaney household is fostered through her determination to make a place for herself there through her behaviour, her speech and the close bond that she develops with Chitrlekha, credit must also be given to the matriarch for creating a space for Prasanti in her home in spite of her inhibitions and conservative outlook. What is noteworthy in the relationship that Prasanti and Chitrlekha share is that while all the other grandchildren have alienated themselves from their grandmother, that vacant space is given access to and filled by only Prasanti. Therefore, Prasanti ends up as her confidante, companion and caregiver. So much that even when this relationship appears to be under threat due to Prasanti's folly in placing stones in Chitrlekha's rice, she is eventually forgiven. There could be several reasons behind Prasanti being given a space at Neupaney Oasis next to Chitrlekha who is casteist and classist. There is an obvious hierarchy in the household with Prasanti occupying the spot of the 'servant'. Her inclusion in this category creates room for Chitrlekha to maintain a certain distance from her by remaining 'above' her while interacting with her in the manner she pleases. Moreover, Prasanti was born to a Brahmin family but transcended the barrier of caste in taking up the identity of a *hijra*. Chitrlekha is fully aware of Prasanti's past and she is obviously aware of who Prasanti has become, that is, a person without a caste. Just as she is able to interact with Nicholas, a beef-eater and an outsider, in her home, accepting Prasanti into her space could also have been made easier on account of her being outside the boundary of caste. The same is not permitted to her granddaughter, her flesh and blood, Bhagwati, as she has married outside her caste into a Damaai family.

## **The Trope of Traditionalism**

Perhaps one of the most pressing issues that Parajuly talks about in his novel is the issue of traditionalism. Traditionalism is the steadfast insistence upon traditional values. It is the adherence to a certain way of seeing and Chitrlekha Neupaney indulges in this. This leads to create problems in the relationship between herself and her grandchildren. She cannot deal with Bhagwati eloping with a 'low caste' so she marries Manasa off to an equally traditional Nepali family who deem it fit for the men folk to engage in alcohol and idle chatter in the drawing room while their women gossip in the kitchen and provide them with delicacies now and then. (Parajuly, 35) It is the baggage of traditionalism which Agastya carries that prevents him from taking his relationship a step further with Nicky. Owing to the expectations he has to shoulder as the eldest son of the Neupaney household, Agastya prevents him from being open about their relationship which eventually takes its toll on their relationship.

Agastya was aware that he was a difficult person to date not because he threw temper tantrums or was high maintenance but because his partner would have to go without letting many people know that they were in a relationship. It'd have to be kept secret from Agastya's world- no introductions to his friends, no movie nights with relatives. It was a solitary, isolating relationship. That was a big sacrifice, and for three years, Nicky had put up with it. (Parajuly, 178)

Traditionalism brings with it the pressure to perform which is why Agastya is led to meet Shivani Dhakal, in an effort to appease his aged grandmother whose wish is to see him 'settled' with a wife and grandchildren and continue with the legacy of the Neupaney

name. Their conversation during and after their meeting suggests that, given Agastya's nature, he would probably 'settle' for her or for another 'eligible lady' his grandmother would find for him.

In the case of Prasanti, a denial of and a refusal to adhere to the traditional gender-based role for which she was 'pro-created' leads her to leave home in Kalimpong and join the life of the *hijra* community in Siliguri and Bombay.

### **Class as a Marker of Difference**

The concept of class emerges as a strong element in the world of Parajuly's narrative fiction. In the case of Agastya, his belonging to an upper caste and even more so, the upper class, works to his benefit because he is able to go abroad to a country where his anonymity affords him the liberty to have a relationship with Nicholas. At the same time, the pressure to perform his filial duty as the grandson of an upper caste, upper class Brahmin family of Gangtok prevents him from being at ease with himself and at home and leads to a fallout between him and his partner. In the case of Prasanti, the fact that she is a 'eunuch servant' in the household of the Neupaneys is constantly thrust against her but she somehow manages to overcome this barrier by forcing her way into certain spaces because she knows full well that the members of the family would not dare provoke her.

Before Prasanti's arrival, no servant, driver or gardener who worked for us could sit on our furniture. When watching TV, they brought their own wicker stools, on which they sat out of everyone's way, like figurines adorning the corners. Prasanti broke the rule within three weeks of her arrival-she said, *hijras* couldn't sit on the

hard mudas because of their sensitive behinds. She took to sitting in a chair that she didn't share with anybody.

It soon became Prasanti's chair. (Parajuly, 104-105)

Prasanti's position in the family and the fact that she has turned her stigma against itself somewhat puts her in an enviable position in comparison to Agastya. However Prasanti was not born under such 'favourable' circumstances. She born to a poor Brahmin family for a 'specific' purpose and that did not provide her with room to express herself. Therefore she ran away from home and eventually ended up at Neupaney Oasis. It is evident that displacement has made a difference to both Agastya and Prasanti in the expression of their identity.

## Chapter IV

### Conclusion-Between the Gaps

The art of writing speaks for the body; writing speaks for the self. Not just the self but rather many selves. Human beings never had a single identity and they cannot be taken as having such in the present day. Although critics of globalization argue that with the advent of cultural homogenization, people run every risk of having a homogenized identities, it must be taken into account that so long as they live by their ideals and so long as they are thinking, breathing individuals, they remain myriad beings with multiple possibilities. Humans play jugular roles not just between the ones assigned to them socially, ranging from friend, lover and foe to that of parent, spouse, sibling and child; they are also stratified beings within themselves. Indeed, the internal determinants of their identity are as crucial as their external determinants. One way to understand what makes them who they are would be through their writings. The fissures that run along the personality of an individual are given articulation through their own writings.

At the very onset of his chapter titled 'Why I Write', Hoshang proudly declares, "As everyone knows by now, I'm homosexual.' To write this sentence and to speak it publicly, which is a great liberation, is why I write." (Merchant, 154) Along these very lines one might add that Parajuly's writings too encapsulate the essence of the queer community in Gangtok. For a community which is still considered taboo, his novel is one of the few platforms that seek to address their issues. Through his characterization and the scenarios he has created, what Parajuly seems to be expressing is that everybody has their own unique identity and that they should be given space to express it in any way they please.



In the course of this research there were several limitations that were faced. The first is the small sample size which came about due to the paucity of time. Owing to the field study being conducted during the winter month of January when most people who were willing to speak were out of the state or away on vacation, the sample size could not be as large as it had been expected. Moreover sexuality and gender identity are two issues that are not discussed much in Gangtok. When it comes to the orientation or the gender identity of the queer individuals, then the topic becomes all the more taboo. The posts that had been uploaded on the social networking sites did not receive many responses and what was interesting to note was that only males responded. This gap opens up further discussion about the social scenario in Gangtok. Furthermore, regarding the response from the queer-identifying group, since queer is a sensitive and personal issue, only two respondents who identified as gay men were willing to participate. Queer has a huge spectrum under it and it is hoped that in further research more individuals will open up about their identities. Between October 2017 to January 2018, attempts were made to contact people who did identify as queer but they either expressed an unwillingness to take part in the research as they were not comfortable expressing their identity or they could not give time for interviews. It is expected that in the future better tools will be applied in approaching potential respondents and for yielding better results.

During this research, there were several parallels between the novel and the observations made in the field study which goes to show that literature speaks for life itself. Some of these included the repression of identity that comes from queer being a social stigma. There was a striking similarity between the experiences of Agastya and the information given by the respondents about a certain section of society in Gangtok who

are closeted about their identities. The respondents stated that within the circle of people who identified as queer, they all felt pigeon holed by the norms that existed in Gangtok society. Some of these included the pressure to live up to one's family name and get married and have children.

Moreover, both the respondents stressed that privilege had enabled them to connect to a wider circle of people who could help them become themselves and shared similar ideas and experiences. Although privilege affords Agastya to live in a foreign country with his boyfriend, his nature and inhibitions prevent him from reaching out to a wider circle of people.

In the case of Prasanti, circumstances force her to turn her stigma against itself because she has to find her place in society somehow. Instead of hiding her identity she has no qualms about dressing up in a "woman's attire" and uses her vocabulary to provoke and taunt people who may have inhibitions about her. One of the respondents claimed that his attempt to rebel against the social norms was through his bags which were a visible marker of how he felt about himself.

According to one respondent who identified as queer, literature and art helped him discover himself. The fact that the novel by Parajuly has so far been the only medium to talk queer in Gangtok and that apart from a few talks and poetry sessions organized by a local bookstore in Gangtok called Rachna Books, indicates that there is much to explore in Gangtok society.

Everyone is a little queer. This is to say that everybody has something unique in all of them. It is not an easy task to make an entire community of individuals who are afraid of social backlash, to come out in the open and express themselves. However, it is

hoped that with time, people will change their outlook if more initiatives related to awareness, art, in depth research and queer friendly policies by the government are undertaken.

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## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/32213/1/tracing-the-history-of-the-word-queer>
- <sup>2</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex, Asexual and so forth
- <sup>3</sup> Transgender or transsexual person.
- <sup>4</sup> A person whose gender identification corresponds to their sex at birth. Also, a person who may perform the appropriate role assigned to their gender by society.
- <sup>5</sup> [https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-homosexuality/\(15.11.2017\)](https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-homosexuality/(15.11.2017))
- <sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_stigma\(15.11.2017\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_stigma(15.11.2017))
- <sup>7</sup> [https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-homosexuality/\(15.11.2017\)](https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-homosexuality/(15.11.2017))
- <sup>8</sup> Wayne Gray, Homosexuality, the Bible, the Truth: The Bible Does Not Condemn Homosexuality(15.11.2017)
- <sup>9</sup> [https://splinternews.com/it-s-still-dangerous-to-be-gay-in-america-here-are-the-1793857468\(16.11.2017\)](https://splinternews.com/it-s-still-dangerous-to-be-gay-in-america-here-are-the-1793857468(16.11.2017))
- <sup>10</sup> [http://www.ibtimes.com/homophobes-likely-be-closet-gays-study-finds-434958\(26.04.2016\)](http://www.ibtimes.com/homophobes-likely-be-closet-gays-study-finds-434958(26.04.2016))
- <sup>11</sup> [http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this\(16.11.2017\)](http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this(16.11.2017))
- <sup>12</sup> [https://thelifeofhijra.wordpress.com/2016/07/29/aravan/\(26.04.2016\)](https://thelifeofhijra.wordpress.com/2016/07/29/aravan/(26.04.2016))
- <sup>13</sup> [http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/a-tradition-of-quiet-tolerance/1/332156.html\(01/03/2016\)](http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/a-tradition-of-quiet-tolerance/1/332156.html(01/03/2016))
- <sup>14</sup> See xiii
- <sup>15</sup> [http://devdutt.com/articles/applied-mythology/queer/did-homosexuality-exist-in-ancient-india.html\(16.11.2017\)](http://devdutt.com/articles/applied-mythology/queer/did-homosexuality-exist-in-ancient-india.html(16.11.2017))
- <sup>16</sup> [https://indiankanon.org/doc/1836974/\(26.04.2016\)](https://indiankanon.org/doc/1836974/(26.04.2016))
- <sup>17</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_space#cite\\_note-6\(17.11.2017\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_space#cite_note-6(17.11.2017))
- <sup>18</sup> See xiv
- <sup>19</sup> [http://indianexpress.com/article/blogs/eunuchs-in-india-through-the-prisms-of-society-history-and-politics/\(17.11.2017\)](http://indianexpress.com/article/blogs/eunuchs-in-india-through-the-prisms-of-society-history-and-politics/(17.11.2017))
- <sup>20</sup> <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/12/17/author-homophobia-came-into-india-not-homosexuality/>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/right-to-privacy-is-a-fundamental-right-supreme-court/articleshow/60203394.cms>
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/hAxjCCa2Ovvn9DJSULDQHP/How-Kochi-Metro-is-making-a-difference-in-the-lives-of-trans.html>
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.census2011.co.in/transgender.php>
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/sikkim.html>
- <sup>25</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/definition/random-sampling>
- <sup>26</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/its-a-textbook-example-of-ethnic-cleansing-un-head/article19668172.ece>
- <sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zq7QPnqLoUk>
- <sup>28</sup> ibid
- <sup>29</sup> ibid
- <sup>30</sup> <https://qz.com/458160/gay-literature-is-firmly-out-of-the-closet-in-india/>
- <sup>31</sup> ibid
- <sup>32</sup> <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/sikkim.html>
- <sup>33</sup> ibid
- <sup>34</sup> <https://www.census2011.co.in/transgender.php>
- <sup>35</sup> Jigme Wangchuk Bhutia, and Kharel, Sunita, eds. *Gazetteer of Sikkim*. Rep. Gangtok: Home Department, Govt. of Sikkim, 2013. Print.
- <sup>36</sup> <http://sikkimsocialwelfare.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Section-4-SJEDW.pdf>
- <sup>37</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/all-you-need-to-know-about-the-transgender-persons-bill-2016/article21226710.ece>
- <sup>38</sup> <http://www.prsindia.org/uploads/media/Transgender/Transgender%20Persons%20Bill,%202016.pdf>
- <sup>39</sup> <http://www.prsindia.org/uploads/media/Transgender/Transgender%20Persons%20Bill,%202016.pdf>

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