

Independent scholar

Arjun Sudhir

Two lives

Biographical note:

Arjun Sudhir was born in 1985 in India. He has lived in India and Australia, and currently lives in Melbourne. He completed a Master of Communications & Media Studies at Monash University in 2008 and a Graduate Diploma of Creative Writing at La Trobe University in 2009. His writing has appeared in *The Hindu*, *Elle* and the *ABC* blog. His short stories have won awards including the Commonwealth Short Story Competition (2009) and Elle Fiction Awards (2011).

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Queer writing – queer India – Kerala – gay Indian writing

When Rajiv was twelve, he had, in a fit of rage, told his parents and sister that he would make an announcement the day he turned twenty-seven. An announcement that would shake their world. That would shame and shock them. Rajiv had forgotten about it until that moment. He was twenty-seven now, and in a car with his parents and sister. His sister, Ruchi, was the one who had refreshed his memory about his precocious declaration:

‘Aren’t you twenty-seven now?’ she asked, in Malayalam. ‘What did you plan to reveal at twenty-seven?’

His parents, sitting at the front, were silent. Although through the rear-view mirror he could see that his mother’s eyes were closed, he knew she was just feigning sleep. His dad’s gaze was focused on the road. He was listening, too.

‘I can’t ever remember saying anything like that. You’re just making things up,’ said Rajiv.

He looked at Ruchi’s face. It was different – radiant. She was getting married in three days. She had always been a pretty girl, but he had never seen her look so expressive. Could it be love? It was an arranged marriage but her face lit up every time Srini’s name was mentioned. He wondered what she saw in her fiancé. Srini was just twenty-four, but his receding hairline and bushy sideburns made him look much older. Rajiv had seen him for the first time the night before. He hadn’t made much of an impression then. All Rajiv could remember were his hairy fingers. Srini was not unusually hairy, but the base of his fingers were covered in thick paddy fields of hair. He wondered if nature had somehow compensated for his hair loss by giving the follicles on his fingers a consolatory growth spurt.

‘*Kallan*,’ said Ruchi. Liar. ‘*Karim kallan*.’ Black liar. ‘I’m sure you remember, but you are just pretending now.’

She pinched his cheeks playfully.

‘You need more cheeks,’ she observed, in English. ‘More padding in your cheeks and you will look fine.’

Was she implying that he didn’t look fine now?

‘Your eyebrows look too thin,’ said Rajiv. ‘Your beautician didn’t do a good job.’ The moment he said it he wondered why his family brought out the worst of him, even after all these years. He was living in another country, after all, away from parental supervision and familial judgment. He didn’t need to prove anything to them. He didn’t have to tell them anything. That he was gay. That less than twenty-four hours ago he had had sex with a pilot at Singapore Airport. A Qantas pilot who had liked his unpadded cheeks and told him he had beautiful cheekbones.

The pilot had been in his mid-thirties and was travelling back to Sydney after a non-stop flight. He had had an aluminium Rimowa suitcase next to him and he was brushing his teeth when Rajiv met him in the bathroom.

‘G’day,’ he said, his greeting frothy with toothpaste.

They got talking. His name was David. He said he wasn’t working that night.

‘I am still on duty, but all I need to do is fly first class and sleep.’

‘I can’t believe you get paid to sleep,’ Rajiv had joked.

‘It would be even nicer if I was sleeping next to a cute man like you,’ he had said, running a ringed finger along Rajiv’s face.

‘High cheekbones,’ he remarked, tapping them with his finger. ‘Beautiful. And nice eyes. Very sexy eyes.’

His fingers left a minty tingle on his cheeks that he felt throughout his flight to India.

Rajiv, Ruchi and their parents were on their way to Kannur, to have a pre-wedding dinner with Srini’s family. It was supposed to be an informal event, just for the families to get to know each other better. Rajiv knew that *informal* was a relative term in India. At least sixty family members were going to be at the dinner. He dreaded seeing Gauri, Srini’s mother, there. He had met her the night before and taken an instant dislike to her.

‘I have three children now,’ she had declared, when he met her. ‘Srini, Ruchi and now you! Srini and Ruchi are settled. It’s your turn to settle down now. I can’t wait to find the perfect girl for you.’

‘Journalist in Australia,’ she added. ‘You would be an instant hit on all the sites. I’m going to create a matrimonial advertisement for you tomorrow!’

She clapped her hands excitedly, like a child who had just been given a new toy.

Technology had changed the face of arranged marriages in India. While Rajiv and his gay friends back in Melbourne were looking online for potential dates, Gauri and other eager mothers were doing all the work for their children.

‘You just sit and focus on your studies ... I will take care of everything else,’ Gauri had told Srini when he was in his final year.

Srini’s job was to be a doctor. Gauri’s job was everything else.

Srini was an only child and he had spent his entire life around his mum. His dad worked as a petroleum engineer in Dubai and brought home the money. When Srini got accepted by a medical college in Chennai, Gauri moved in with him. She wanted to keep an eye on him. She wanted to make sure none of the dark-skinned lower-class Tamil girls trapped him with their tricks. She used to have nightmares about having to take care of a dark-skinned baby who called her Grandma in Tamil. She needn’t have worried: Srini was awkward around girls, and his hair loss made him insecure. That his classmates called him ‘Baldy’ did not help his plummeting confidence, either. He started wearing a baseball cap to class. He spent all his time studying. Gauri worked behind the scenes on his online matrimonial ads. He was just twenty-four, but she wanted to get him married to a big-eyed, curly-haired Kerala girl before he went completely bald. And Ruchi was just that. Big-eyed, curly haired. And fresh out of medical school.

‘I’m going to lose it if she talks about that matrimonial ad again,’ said Rajiv, to his mum, as they got out of the car and began walking to the dinner party. Ruchi and his

dad were walking in front of them, hand in hand. Rajiv's mum tried to hold his hand, but he pulled it away.

'I can't help it,' said his mum. 'And why does it annoy you so much? Aren't you ever going to get married?'

'I don't think so,' said Rajiv.

'Never?' asked his mum.

His answer stopped her in her tracks. She narrowed her eyes.

'Not everyone needs to get married.' Rajiv tried to sound philosophical. 'You don't have to have to be married to be happy in life. Your life doesn't depend on who you marry and how many children you have.'

'But don't you need a companion? You'll be lonely. Maybe you should get a dog, then?'

A dog or a wife: those were his two options. What about a man? Surely, spending your life with a man was better than spending it with a dog. Men had longer life expectancies, after all.

At dinner, Rajiv chose a seat as far away from Gauri as possible to avoid potential unpleasantness. Ruchi and Srini were standing at the entrance, greeting guests. A cameraman was filming the event. He kept shining a bright lamp directly into people's faces.

'Look into the camera,' the cameraman ordered Rajiv. 'You are the bride's brother, aren't you?'

'Try to look natural. Don't look like you're posing,' said the man sitting next to him. He casually wrapped an arm around Rajiv's chair and introduced himself as Deepak.

'Rajiv. Are you one of Srini's cousins?'

'Yes, from his mum's side. Have you had a chance to talk to Aunt Gauri? Has she set you up with anyone yet?'

'She's trying to, but I have so far resisted,'

'Why?' He looked straight into Rajiv's eyes. 'Girls not your style?'

Rajiv met his gaze and Deepak smiled back. Rajiv asked him if he could pass him the jug of water.

The dinner was a traditional Kerala *sadya* served on banana leaves. He ate with his fingers, something he had not done in a very long time. He had grown up eating with his fingers, but his last seven years in Melbourne had changed, among other things, his dining habits.

As he was about to fold the leaf to signify he was finished, Gauri, his new mum, came running to him.

'You need to eat more,' she said. 'You are so thin. I will make sure you are at least five kilos heavier by the time you go back to Australia.'

‘But I don’t want to put on weight,’ protested Rajiv. ‘I’m happy with my weight.’

‘Stop being fussy,’ she said, in English. ‘Just eat some more.’

‘You look stressed. We could get out of here.’ It was Deepak.

‘We?’

‘Yeah, I could show you the house. It’s my ancestral house, after all. And you can escape Aunt Gauri’s eagle eye for five minutes.’

Rajiv smiled and said that was as good a reason as any other.

Deepak told him that the house was a hundred and twenty years old. It was built the traditional way, with an orange tiled roof and low ceilings.

‘‘Why did they have such low ceilings? Were people so small back then?’ asked Rajiv.

‘You speak like a typical foreigner. NRI. Non. Resident. Indian.’ He paused after every word as if to emphasize the fact.

‘And you have an opinion about everything I say,’ said Rajiv. ‘What do you do, by the way?’

‘I’m doing my masters in Marketing, in Bangalore. You just finished doing one in Journalism, didn’t you? How come you didn’t decide to become a doctor like your parents and sister?’

Rajiv wondered how he knew so much about him. ‘I guess I am the black sheep of the family,’ he said.

‘Black sheep, bullshit,’ said Deepak. ‘You are one scared black sheep. You didn’t do medicine because you were scared it would force you to stay here and face reality. You just did some fancy course so you could live far away from everyone and everything.’

‘You don’t know anything about me. You just met me a couple of hours ago. I can’t understand why you are being so offensive. I’m going back in.’

Deepak apologised. He said he’d had a bad day and he had no right to judge.

‘It’s just this fucking family. Spending time with them is making me go crazy.’

‘Why? Is everything ok?’

‘Yes, sure, man, sure. I’m just being silly,’ Deepak replied. ‘I’ll show you the rest of the place. I know it’s dark, but you should see the *kolam*. It’s behind the house, completely covered by trees. I swim naked every time I’m here.’

The water in the *kolam* was jade green and it had a thin film of weed, *payal*, floating on it.

Deepak was very athletic and darted to the other side of the pool as soon as they got there. He stood on the ledge and pulled his pants down. He pissed a steady, forceful stream into the pool.

‘You are polluting the water,’ Rajiv said. He found it hard not to stare at Deepak’s penis. It was quite impressive even in its detumescent state. After relieving himself,

Deepak gave his penis a tug, turned around and pulled his pants up after making sure Rajiv had seen his plump bottom.

‘You are such a show-off,’ Rajiv told Deepak on the way back to the house. ‘I have never seen anyone peeing with their pants all the way down.’

‘But you loved the show, didn’t you?’ he asked.

Rajiv was thinking of a witty comeback when Deepak kissed him hard. Deepak’s kiss tasted of the rice *payasam* they had for dessert. He was a fantastic kisser.

‘You have such shining bright eyes,’ he said to Rajiv when they moved apart.

Rajiv’s parents were happy about their sudden friendship.

‘He seems like a good fellow. Really good at cricket, too,’ said his dad. ‘Most of your friends were girls, weren’t they, when you were growing up? I think he’d be a good influence on you.’

And a good influence he was. Rajiv spent most of the two days before the wedding with Deepak. Rajiv’s parents’ house was crowded with guests and his mum suggested that they sleep at the cheap hotel next door until the wedding.

‘You are young boys, you will be fine at the hotel.’

‘I’m not a boy, I’m a man,’ protested Rajiv, in an attempt not to sound too eager. ‘I’ll turn thirty in a couple of years! I need clean bathrooms and running hot water.’

The days that followed, Rajiv thought, were the best of his life. Surrounded by relatives, Deepak would whisper sexual platitudes in Rajiv’s ear. Rajiv would tell Deepak off for being cheesy, but it would make him hard in public. Rajiv couldn’t wait until they went back to their filthy hotel room where they would spend hours having sex. Rajiv had always been the passive partner in all of his previous relationships. With Deepak, things were different, somehow. There was something about his carefree machismo that made Rajiv want to take control. In bed, Deepak was completely under Rajiv’s spell, and Rajiv liked how he was in total control of his body. He loved the way he could feel shivers of pleasure pulsating through Deepak’s body every time he penetrated him.

The wedding was grand and it was a success. In true Indian fashion, over a thousand people attended the wedding. There were no major mishaps, and if there were any, Rajiv wasn’t aware of them. He did lose a pair of sandals, but Deepak told him that that was to be expected at any large Indian gathering where you had to take off your shoes.

‘So that doesn’t count,’ he whispered in Rajiv’s ear.

His whisper felt like a warm kiss.

Being a medical student, Srini, Rajiv’s new brother-in-law, only had a week off for his wedding. To make the most of the seven days they had together, his mum insisted that they all join the couple on their honeymoon. Rajiv’s dad hired a small van for the event. Rajiv and Deepak joined the families and the couple, as well. Deepak was a last-minute addition.

‘You’ll get bored spending time with the oldies,’ said Gauri, Rajiv’s mum. ‘Deepak will keep you company.’

The honeymoon was in Coorg. Famous for its coffee plantations, Coorg was the greenest place Rajiv had ever seen. There were dense forests everywhere and the trees and shrubs had wet, fleshy, deep green leaves. Rajiv wondered if it was all just an illusion. Could he be falling in love for the first time? Was everything greener just because of that?

They stayed in an old bungalow owned by a distant relative. The newlyweds occupied a secluded part of the bungalow and the parents occupied the main part of the house. Deepak and Rajiv were given a small room at the back, which used to be part of the servants’ quarters. It had no electricity, and they had to light a fire at night to keep themselves warm.

At night, Deepak produced a chessboard and a set of iPod speakers. They played chess listening to The Beatles. Rajiv was surprised by Deepak’s taste in music; he had expected him to be a hip-hop aficionado, but here they were, listening to the melodic drone of The Beatles, playing chess. He was very good at chess. At one point, when Deepak was concentrating on his chess move, Norwegian Wood playing in the background, a wave of happiness flooded his being. He looked at Deepak. Deepak’s chocolate brown eyes were sparkling in the light of the fire. His brows were furrowed in concentration. He noticed he had deep dimples even when he wasn’t smiling. He wanted to kiss him but he didn’t want to distract him. At that moment Rajiv thought that Deepak was the most beautiful man he had ever seen.

‘You are staring at me,’ said Deepak.

‘You are beautiful,’ said Rajiv.

‘You say beautiful. I say checkmate,’ he said, moving his queen. ‘Game over!’

The next morning, they visited the Tibetan settlement near Coorg. Rajiv stared at the big golden Buddhas and the Tibetan monks who were chanting in unison. Their deep guttural chants were hypnotic, and Rajiv wondered what the chants meant. He looked at Deepak. He was sitting on the floor away from their group. He was weeping. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. Rajiv didn’t know what to do. He noticed that he had dimples even when he was crying.

‘You have been so distracted throughout the trip, you haven’t even spoken to Srini,’ said Ruchi, as they got out of the temple. Deepak had left first and was talking to a young monk in the garden outside the monastery.

‘This trip is about you and Srini,’ Rajiv said. ‘I am just trying to stay out of the way. I can’t believe Srini’s mum got us all to join you guys on your honeymoon. Are you and Srini having the best times of your lives? Are you making lots of babies?’

‘Are you that keen to be an uncle?’ asked Ruchi, laughing.

Rajiv noticed that although it had only been a few days since the wedding, she somehow looked older, more grown up. In less than a week of marriage, her face had a new solidness to it. Her expressions and responses had become careful; they almost sounded rehearsed. He knew that in a few years, her slender frame would fill up, and

she would look like his mum, aunts and all the other women in his family. He wondered if, in a few years, he, too, would start looking like the men in his family.

He followed Ruchi to an adjoining café to have breakfast. Deepak was sitting next to Gauri and quietly drinking tea. Gauri was pouring her tea into her saucer and slurping the liquid noisily.

‘Too hot,’ she explained. ‘Can’t drink it from the cup.’

Rajiv noticed that the white cup and saucer had chalky grey marks from being used too many times. The sides were chipped.

‘*Nalla ruchi undu,*’ she said, touching her lip to a jagged end. Tastes very good.

A brown film of cream from the tea clung to her lip. She wiped it with the back of her hand.

‘Why aren’t you guys drinking coffee?’ asked Rajiv. ‘Coffee is what Coorg is famous for.’

‘You can have your coffee,’ said Gauri. ‘I’m happy with my *chaaya*.’

The waiter, who was also the cook, brought two plates of *idlis*. Rajiv told him he would just order a coffee.

‘You should eat more,’ Gauri told Rajiv. ‘You should learn from Deepak. He is so fit and healthy. He’s eating so well.’

‘And he gets all the girls,’ she continued. ‘He’s been getting so many responses online. I’m so glad he has kind of settled down now.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Rajiv. He looked at Deepak. He was eating his *idlis* intently. He did not look up.

‘Didn’t he tell you? Boys – I can never understand what they talk about when they spend time together! He and his dad met Shalini a few weeks ago. Such a pretty girl. *Sundari*. Her parents are doctors. And she is a chemical engineer. Just got a job with a cosmetic company. What is the name of that company, Deepu? *Lorry*-something?’

Deepu muttered something but Rajiv didn’t hear it. He spent the next couple of hours confused and unable to concentrate. He followed his dad and mum to the van and dreaded having to spend the four-hour drive back home sitting next to Deepak.

‘The honeymoon is over,’ Rajiv’s dad announced from the front of the van. ‘So soon!’

‘Why didn’t you tell me about it earlier?’ Rajiv asked Deepak, a couple of hours later. He could hear Gauri snoring in the seat in front of them.

‘It never came up, did it?’

‘That’s such a poor excuse.’

Deepak asked Rajiv if he had any idea about his life. Did he know that his mum died when he was twelve? Did he know that his dad had never remarried and he had been his world since she died? No, Deepak didn’t think so. All they did was *just* fuck for a few days. *Fuck*.

Although Deepak was whispering, his enunciation of the word *fuck* made Srini and Ruchi turn and look back. Rajiv's parents lived in constant denial of any sexual references, so swear words didn't exist for them; they heard it, too, but they chose to ignore it.

Back in their room, Deepak apologised for his behaviour in the van.

'I should have told you sooner,' he said.

'Believe me, I know how you feel. We both have the same sort of families,' said Rajiv. He paused for a moment before adding, 'But I don't think I could ever get married just to make my parents happy.'

He regretted saying that the moment the words were out of his mouth.

'That's because you can afford not to,' Deepak replied. Rajiv noticed that the veins on Deepak's temples were protruding. 'You ran away from everything. You moved to the end of the world, that's what you did. And cut yourself off from your parents. I can't afford to do that. Not after all the sacrifices my dad made for me.'

'But have you tried talking to your dad?' asked Rajiv. 'I'm sure he loves you enough to let you do what makes you happy. And what about the poor girl? I'm sure she wouldn't be thrilled to be marrying a gay man.'

'It's easy for you to say. You take the moral high ground, but you forget that you are not even out to your parents. Not even when you can go back to your comfortable hiding place if things don't go so well. You have no right to lecture me.'

Deepak left that evening. He told everyone that he had received an email from one of his university lecturers and had to meet her urgently. Rajiv thought he wouldn't say goodbye to him, but he did.

'I'll always remember you fondly,' he told Rajiv. 'Despite the way things ended between us.'

'Likewise,' said Rajiv. He found himself choking tears back. 'I wish you happiness, whatever you choose to do.'

Rajiv spent the next couple of days in a daze. He didn't speak to anybody. He felt nobody would understand him, anyway.

Determined to extract himself from his state of stupor, he acted on a whim and drove to Chennai, six hundred kilometres away. Rajiv did not generally enjoy driving, but the twelve-hour drive was soothing. The car felt like a comforting cocoon. He found that he could express himself freely within this man-made microcosm. He was free to cry and yell without any judgement.

On his way, he saw a pond, a *kolam*, similar to the one Deepak had shown him a couple of weeks ago. He stopped the car. The sun was setting and the *kolam* looked like it was lit from within. He got out and jumped into the pool with all his clothes on. The water had looked clear in the twilight but it was murky and green with *paval*. His clothes were covered in a veil of foul-smelling weed when he got out. He hadn't brought any clothes with him to change into. The film of weed clung to the white

leather car seats as he drove. The smell nauseated him at first, but after a while he stopped noticing it. His nose got used to it.

‘Why do you smell like shit?’ asked Sarah, when she met him at the lobby of her apartment building in Chennai.

He followed her to her apartment and she gave him a very large t-shirt and baggy track pants that belonged to her dad. Showered and smelling like Dove soap, he looked at himself in the full-length mirror in her bathroom. The bagginess of the clothes made him look weak and emaciated. His eyes looked dead. It was almost as if somebody had turned its lights off.

He and Sarah had been best friends back in college. Sarah was beautiful and opinionated. He was awkward and introverted. Despite their differences, he became the yin to her yang, and they spent all their time together. They discussed books and movies. Rajiv discovered that beneath his many layers of shyness lay the same streak of rebellion she so fiercely displayed. She refused to be dominated by men and lived life on her own terms. And he refused to spend his life in denial, pretending to live the great Indian dream. He didn’t want a wife who came with a dowry of gold and a bright red car with baby seats. He wanted to be happy, be true to who he was. And in an attempt to do that, he moved as far away from everything as he could.

‘You fall in love so easily, my love,’ chided Sarah, after he narrated his story to her. She stroked her long straight hair languidly. ‘You deserve someone braver, stronger. I have never told you this, but I think you are really brave. You always stand up for what you believe in.’

She paused for a moment, stopped combing her hair with her fingers, and with hesitation asked what was stopping him from coming out to his parents.

‘You know my parents pretend that sex does not exist. I have never had a conversation with them around sex. It would feel so strange to have a conversation about homosexuality when we have never had a discussion about sexuality. They have never even asked me if I’m dating anyone.’

Sarah nodded and they sat in silence.

‘Maybe I make these excuses because I’m scared,’ he said. ‘I guess I’m scared of them being ashamed of me. You know how hurtful they can get, when they are not happy with me.’

‘But you have always been sure of who you are. Even back in college. You always knew who you were and what you wanted. You travelled thousands of kilometres and started a new life. That’s remarkable.’

‘And,’ she added. ‘You can’t control how people react. If ever you choose to come out to your parents, you will be doing it because you want to be honest. It won’t be to upset them. The ball is in their court once you tell them. Honesty is a virtue, isn’t it? You will be fine.’

On his way back home, Rajiv wondered if Sarah was right and it was time to tell his parents the truth. Before he left her house, Sarah had made him call his dad to let him

know that he was fine. His dad sounded worried and told him that he had been selfish and irresponsible.

‘You can’t just disappear like that. You are a grown man. You need to stop acting like a child.’

Rajiv did not protest. He told him he was sorry. His father sounded confused by his response and awkwardly told him that it was fine. He changed the topic before Rajiv could react. He talked about Ruchi and how she was on her way to Mumbai with Gauri.

‘I have to go,’ he said. ‘I am getting a call from the hospital.’

Rajiv found the drive back home tedious. The twelve hours back felt more like twelve days. He passed by the *kolam*, but it no longer seemed to have any significance. He slowed the car down and looked at the pond. The water was opaque with mud and there was a farmer bathing his buffalo in it. The animal was splashing mud everywhere but the farmer was patiently scrubbing its skin with a dirty rag. Rajiv waved to him, but he just looked appalled by the gesture and looked away.

It was dark by the time Rajiv got back home. The front gate felt heavy when he pushed it open, but he felt a strange sense of calm. He parked the car in the driveway. There were hundreds of plastic chairs stacked on top of each other in the veranda, but there was no one around. He rang the bell. He waited for a few minutes before ringing it again.

‘Coming,’ said a voice from inside the house. It sounded like Deepak.

Research statement

Research background

Homosexual activity is a criminal offense under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a code drafted by Lord Macaulay during British rule. Homosexual activity between consenting adults was decriminalised by the Delhi High Court in 2009, but it was overruled by the Supreme Court in 2013. Currently, homosexual sexual activity carries a ten-year sentence in India.

Research contribution

This work explores an encounter between two gay men, one living in Australia and the other in India. The piece explores complex and interrelated themes such as sexual identity, immigration and family duty. The short fiction format aims to humanise these themes, without sounding prescriptive.

Research significance

This work explores attitudes to male homosexuality in India, which range from paternalistic to hostile (Kavi 2008). Many gay men and women emigrate out of India because of hostility of the larger Indian public towards the gay community. This makes this community an interesting case study for understanding immigration patterns. By blurring the boundaries between social sciences and humanities, the fiction format provides a social context and setting for such motivations. This work was peer-reviewed and judged worthy of publication in *TEXT*, a peak journal for the creative writing discipline.

Work cited

Kavi, A 2008 'Media Watch: Gay Rights and the Indian Press', *SAJA.org*, at <http://www.sajaforum.org/2008/07/media-watch-gay.html> (accessed 1 September 2015)