

***Research Essay on***

***Raqeeb Raza: Addressing Male Sexuality, Rejecting Heteronormative Masculinity through  
Photography***

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*Submission of Research Essay in fulfillment of Internship at*

*Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies,*

*Hyderabad*

*27th July 2021*

## **Artist's Bio**

*Raqeeb Raza is a research scholar of English Literature who aims to change the way the mainstream media perceive male sexuality. Through the art of photography, he does so — highlighting intimacy through masculinities, male sexualities, and their unique experiences.*

## **Addressing Male Sexuality, Rejecting Heteronormative Masculinity**

The Instagram account of Raqeeb Raza, [@daintystrangerphotos](#), is an art gallery of bodies captured in their intimate moments. More than that, it's a reflection of the reality that men in our society struggle through. Men baring their bodies is a way of being accessible and emancipated, and at the same time revealing one's deepest scars, saddest secrets, and most significant vulnerabilities.

The idea of masculinity that we possess hinders any expression of male sexuality that doesn't fit in the heteronormative framework. Raqeeb's account describes the work as "*A writer & photographer who captures intimate portraits & intricacies of male sexuality.*" Raqeeb's work captures *masculinity, intimacy, warmth, and sexuality*. However, more than representation, it's a rejection of the dominant notions of masculinity.

With nearly 7000 followers as of July 2021, Raqeeb is changing our worldview and introducing an aspect of intimate tenderness to bodies, masculinity, and male sexuality. Through these stories, Raqeeb also captures how society responds to male sexuality and masculinity and how it leads to conflict while resisting stereotypes and the trauma borne out of body shaming.

Raqeeb's work highlights varied aspects of masculinity that men struggle through every day without stating anything explicitly. He weaves complex emotions through his metaphorical words. It brings to the surface the bullying and other mental and physical sufferings that men struggle through due to their sexuality or bodies. The page was started as a way for Raqeeb to tell his own story, and it only grew from there, with other people approaching him to be photographed and tell their story.

Not all the people Raqeeb has worked with or who engage with his work are members of the LGBTQIA+ Community. Many of them are cisgender men who have been at the receiving end of hatred from society due to failure to comply with hegemonic masculinities. Raqeeb aims to break these very notions of Heteronormative masculinity by providing a platform to men from different walks of life, even crossing borders for collaboration.

Body Positivity is not an easy task. Raqeeb has been through instances where Instagram removed his posts over being reported, which brings us to how there's discomfort with seeing male bodies that do not fit the norms. At a broader level, it's also about censoring intimate displays of bodies. Raqeeb himself struggled with body issues and embracing oneself in a society that constantly mocks and demeans effeminate behavior from men.

A significant aspect of Raqeeb's work lies in its warmth and accessibility. Raqeeb's work doesn't build on the dominant theorization of masculinities and sexualities. However, it's still a strong reflection of those who are willing to see it through the lens of academia. I aim to highlight this aspect of Raqeeb's work through my own experience of working with him. For others, it's a much-needed reflection of their own lives or of men they might know.

Raqeeb continues to subvert the ideas of masculinity that men internalize due to patriarchy and toxic masculinity. Instead, he focuses on vulnerability, intimacy, warmth, and emotions in an attempt to demolish society's perspective of a naked body as vulgar or for sexual pleasure. His work is inclusive, involving people from every walk of life. He has covered mental health issues, Dalit bodies, child abuse, sexual abuse, body image issues, and forbidden desires.

## **In Conversation with Raqeeb Raza**

### **I. Documenting Intimacy, Bodies, and Masculinities**

Raqeeb's intention behind the page was his passion for documenting/photographing bodies and giving space to people who didn't feel they belong in society, expanding upon the male body paradigm and how it's supposed to look. The work by Raqeeb centers around intimacy, capturing emotions like capturing two hands touching each other. He prefers the term *nudity* to describe his work instead of *eroticism*, which has some sexual connotations. One of the reasons behind

starting his work, Raqeeb says, *“I didn’t feel my body was represented in the mainstream.”*

Concerning his usual routine of work, nothing has changed for Raqeeb. The only difference is engagement with fashion and portfolio shoot to earn side by side. Even after knowing that academia is a time-consuming job, Raqeeb engages with his project where he meets people around 11 am, talk to them until 2 pm, and shoot them through the day. He never shoots two people on the same day to give them more space and justice.

Raqeeb doesn’t prefer the term *queer artist*, given that there are many more layers to him that impact his work, and queerness is just one of the many. He also mentions, *“You don’t call a straight artist a cishet artist or a woman as a woman artist. Just call me an artist. A person’s artistic expression is not based on one single identity; it’s an amalgamation of multiple aspects of identities and experiences.”* He recognizes that some artists like to be called *queer artists*, and he doesn’t wish to negate their experience.

## **II. Changing the Mindset: Desirable and Undesirable Bodies**

When asked if there’s been a change in the mindset of society around bodies, Raqeeb says our idea of bodies hasn’t changed. It has been ingrained in us for a long time. Perfectly build bodies sold through capitalism only make us feel small, and it happens with queer people during the ‘Pride’ month. It always ends in self-doubt. He acknowledges that there has been a change with the younger generation, who are more comfortable with their bodies. The blowing up of social media has been a reason for providing a sense of comfort and consolidation. He hopes that in ten years, we will have a society that affirms all kinds of bodies.

Raqeeb mentions that stigma is present throughout different social locations be it in terms of caste or region or any other aspect, when asked about stigma related to male bodies. Our society is inherently toxic about male bodies and perfection, which is scary. Another significant stigma is of effeminate expression within men, whether straight or queer. There is no regard if it’s an individual natural expression or not; there is only trauma. He also mentions, *“We need to understand that the politics surrounding and the kind of social awareness society has pushed the same stigma.”*

### **III. The Pandemic and Loneliness**

Raqeeb says that no one had the perfect pandemic life. He was stuck in Kolkata for six months, a new space where his relationship with his body became aggravated due to the accumulation of trigger points over a year. A space like home makes us stop and think, and even though physical interaction was present, it was not the same.

The concept behind ‘Isolated Bodies,’ a segment that featured people and their relationship with their bodies during the lockdown period, started with a self-portrait where Raqeeb opened up about his loneliness resulting from an aggravated relationship his body. It was the first time he took submissions and informed some friends from the artists’ fraternity. After inviting people initially, he started receiving responses from people as they felt a shared experience. And that’s how Raqeeb curated the ‘Isolated Bodies’ segment.

### **IV. The Ethics of documenting Intimacy**

When Raqeeb started working, Section 377 was still a part of the IPC. During those days, he had to be extra careful about his shots as they could be thrown into jail. He always asked people if they are comfortable in showing their faces and would photograph them accordingly. There are also concerns like when people want their pictures to be removed after being published for some time due to various reasons. Raqeeb honors their consent. However, he has stopped working with hesitant people due to time constraints. Given that Raqeeb works with nudity, he says, *“I have to be careful not to cross a line. It hampers my work and also the kind of culture that we have in the photography industry.”*

Raqeeb believes in the idea of listening and being compassionate and kind when someone opens up to him about their traumatic experiences. He tries to relate to them and give verbal comfort even though he can’t go through the same experience. Lastly, if needed, he also gives them a warm hug.

On his intersectional engagement with Dalit Queer people and Dalit Tribal people, Raqeeb mentions that he cannot talk from their perspective. Still, he can say from his experience of working on a segment on ‘Dalit Bodies.’ One person from a particular tribe in Odisha told Raqeeb that their bodies are treated as mere flesh. He further says, *“They are seen as something.*

*That can be done away with as they do not have any significance in social structure. It's seen as vulgar because tribal people have different ways of dressing. There is a sense of how we look at other bodies, and it's ingrained due to the patriarchal, heteronormative bodies.”* The aim is to educate people and break away from the sad reality of stigma, and Raqeeb's platform is one such entry point for the same.

#### **V. Social Media: Representation, Engagement, and Deconstructing 'Perfect Bodies'**

Raqeeb says he has been lucky with his audience as he hasn't received many hate comments or severe criticism of his work. He has struggled through the 'shadow ban' of Instagram without any constant influx of audience. For the most part, the audience has been respectful. However, his identity as a Muslim queer person was attacked at times, and some people termed his content as pornographic.

*Raqeeb says, “I believe everyone should have an opinion, although I might disagree with them. If haters comment anything, it means they are engaging with my work, and that engagement is good for me, whether their opinion is good or bad. I always reply to all. To haters, I say, “I respect your opinions, but I do not agree with them. May you have a good life”. I feel replying to hate with hate continues the cycle.”*

Raqeeb's work is also a point of convergence and forging solidarity between cisgender men and queer men regarding the notion of toxic masculinity and how ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism aid such notions to flourish. His work is an essential platform for the same. There is also convergence on the idea of the violence of identity. For straight men, they are a part of the structure that benefits them, because of which the violence they face isn't as severe as faced by queer men based on their appearance.

A peculiarity of the responses received from the audience has been the response from women. Raqeeb discusses how many women said that they associated men's bodies with violence or a kind of strictness. However, Raqeeb's work portrays them as usual and in a gentle, delicate, and comforting manner.

Raqeeb has seen some of the trendy reels that show having a perfect muscular body to attain happiness and social validation. Raqeeb doesn't question the individual intention behind such content but says, "*We need to ask if it's right for the future generation to grow up and see, definitely not.*". The idea that a man without a perfect body or with nerdy glasses, oiled hair is somehow undesirable is very problematic. Through this, there is no awareness of body positivity but just simply following the norms. The notion of Body Positivity becomes crucial when the content creators have a huge following.

Raqeeb strongly feels that the pages and artists who document conventional bodies are not doing any new work and are lazy. They're reporting what is already traditional and ingrained in our minds as beautiful. Documenting bodies that are representative of our bodies or of those who we know requires hard work. People also asked Raqeeb if he's trying to change his audience through documentation of conventionally considered beautiful bodies. Raqeeb's simple response is, "*I document all kinds of bodies.*" He also says that even the people with the so-called perfect bodies suffer through the anxiety of maintaining the same, and they work on their bodies due to body image issues and discrimination. One of his aims is to deconstruct the term 'perfect.' He adds, "*There is nothing called perfect; each body is different. If all the people who go to the gym had the same thing to eat, they wouldn't have the same bodies as each body reacts differently.*"

### **Reflecting upon my experience of working with Raqeeb**

Working with Raqeeb helped me feel a sense of freedom with my body as a queer man when all the bodies I could see were the *macho* ones with a muscular physique. We have been taught to think of that form as masculinity as the epitome, and Raqeeb's work is a necessary and robust argument to counter it based on lived experiences of queer and cishet men. I worked with Raqeeb in 2019 on a series on *Separation*. It was a collaborative effort with the artist Aditya Verma. Raqeeb also writes fantastically. Some of the words on the second post of separation are:

*"...Black, the color of separation,*

*Black, the color of mourning and silent tears,*

*Black, the color of this cycle of eternal separation and unification and every other fucking thing that happens in between...."*

The post describes the work as “A vision about separation as a phenomenon and byproduct of human relations, hoping to share our observation about it in our distinct ways” The words and the photographs convey these emotions very well, and the very idea that these can be expressed through our bodies is exciting and heart-warming.

I remember the time when I signed up to be a model. When the day came, it was a hot summer Sunday, and I traveled through the metro to Meera’s place where the shoot was supposed to occur. Meera was going to model with me, and she was very kind to me and showed me around her place, and we had a little chat. Soon Raqeeb came over, followed by Aditya, and we had long conversations about art, our lives, and the idea of separation. It was instantly a safe, affirming space for me even amidst total strangers. I also signed a consent form, which I believe is a crucial part of the ethics of any such work.

Although I was a bit hesitant to be nude in front of others, slowly, I became comfortable. The idea of being naked in front of people I’m not engaged with romantically was a puzzling one, but I found comfort and liberation. I did not feel ashamed of my body or the way it was. We had snacks, tea, and we shot in different locations while everyone was engaged in conversation like we’re a family. Raqeeb was also considerate of my hesitance to get photographed and did not shoot my face in any photos he clicked. He also shared his own experience with photography and, as a Muslim queer person, his life in general. I felt like I belonged in that space, surrounded by creative people from the community. There was no judgment, only compassion, expression, and comfort.

I remember Raqeeb asking me again and again if I was okay with it, and also Meera offered me to wash the paint off my body at her place. These small instances of kindness made me more comfortable in expressing what I was feeling through only my body. When Aditya came over, he started painting on our bodies. He used contrasting colors and painted figures that would make a different sense when our bodies are aligned. When we started shooting, we would sit and stand in different positions to make sense of the artwork on our bodies.



I felt worthy of being a canvas for art and being the muse for a photographer. I felt happy and proud. There was a sense of confidence and comfort within my own body, which is still prevalent whenever I share the pictures of the photoshoot with my friends and proudly say, “*That’s me in the photograph as the model!!!*” and when they respond if they feel the same, or if they would like to do something similar.

Ultimately, Raqeeb’s work reminds me of this quote by the feminist philosopher bell hooks from her work *Feminism is for everybody* -

“*What is and was needed is a vision of masculinity where self-esteem and self-love of one’s unique being form the basis of identity.*”

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**Where to find Raqeeb’s work:** Raqeeb continues to document bodies while engaging with other forms of photography like portraits and fashion photography. Some of his work can be checked out at [The Quint](#), [Cosmopolitan](#), [Feminism In India](#), [Homegrown](#), and [Vice](#). One can also explore his fantastic photo series and essays at Gaysi Family. Some of them on Gaysi include [Relationships and Toxicity](#), [Falling In and Out of Love](#), [One Fine Day](#), [Aspirations of Desire](#), [Stripping off the Soul](#), and [Forbidden Desires](#). His Instagram account features all of his amazing work supplemented by his intricate, detailed, and heart-warming words.

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### **Questionnaire for Interview**

1. What is your aim through your art (for instance, the idea of comfort with one's body)? And what kind of language should one use as there are many terms like *explicit*, *erotic*, *nude*, etc., all of which convey a different meaning?
2. Can you elaborate upon the 'Isolated Bodies' segment, which was different from what you usually do? How did you feel about the response you received? How did the pandemic change the way you work?
3. Do you reject heteronormative ideals of masculinity through your work? How do you challenge masculinity through the representation of bodies as they are?
4. How do you deal with the censorship norms of Instagram?
5. Could you guide me through how does a typical photoshoot go for you?
6. As a queer form of art, what are the ethical concerns you encounter, and how do you deal with them?
7. Has your art provided a safe space for people to deal with their vulnerabilities and traumas? Do you believe that the space you provided helps deal with the violence of identity that men go through in our society?
8. What is the most common stigma regarding male sexuality and nudity that you have come across? (audience and models' experience)
9. What is your view of the muscular bodies everywhere, from T.V. shows to movies, as the epitome of masculinity? Or the conventional norms of male beauty standards that we see through the Instagram reels? Do you think there is a privilege to this and what you think of the message it conveys especially given the notice they speak?
10. Do you think addressing male bodies and rejecting heteronormative ideals of masculinity is a point where all cis men, whether cis het or members of the LGBTQIA+ community, can forge solidarity and fight back patriarchy? (body positivity, masculinity, male sexuality, etc.)
11. How do you ensure that the bodies you represent are through an intersectional lens? Have you encountered an instance where you could see the difference marked on bodies due to any specific social location/identity like caste?
12. When any media outlet features your work, do you think there is something that they miss and should include more?
13. Queer and trans bodies have a history of fetishization and dehumanization. People think of queer bodies as sexual, and you subvert that by showing the intimacy? Do you believe your art in any way challenges these notions (degradation and fetishization)?
14. From your experience, do people with 'perfect bodies' also have body image issues?
15. What are your plans for the future to take this art forward?

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