

Q & A
Queer in Asian America
Edited by David L. Eng
and Alice Y. Hom

Hom
1997

Q & A



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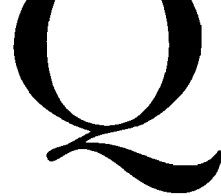
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A tenth-generation photographically derived
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17. Curry Queens and Other Spices

Sandip Roy

In India the era of kings and queens was long over, and the royal palaces were being converted into five-star hotels. In England the queen was just a dowdy woman living in a drafty palace, presiding over the tattered remains of her empire and her once picture-perfect royal family. But in America, as I tentatively explored my gayness, I started meeting the real queens—drag queens, potato queens, rice queens, and salsa queens. What I needed to find, my friends assured me, was a bona fide curry queen.

The stereotypical image of a curry queen is British, for the Raj-nostalgia cottage industry has ensured that the British fascination with the “jewel in the crown” will live on. The British curry queen is preferably Oxford educated—or has, at the very least, had a public schooling, complete with cold showers and warm blazers—with a nostalgia for Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster, thin cucumber sandwiches for tea, and then sex with the natives (maybe with the young liveried waiter at the exclusive white-sahibs-only club). How decadent! But curry queens are not exclusively British. If you look long and hard, ensconced between those American newspaper ads for GAM (Gay Asian Male) and GLM (Gay Latin Male) you can find a curry queen or two on this side of the Atlantic as well.

Once, mistakenly thinking of myself as Asian, I answered an ad for a GAM. After five minutes of pleasant telephone chitchat, the man asked me where I was from. Playing coy, I asked him to guess.

“Thailand?”

“Close, but not quite.”

“Indonesia?”

“Wrong direction.”

He seemed genuinely puzzled. For him the largest continent ended at the borders of Thailand. I finally told him I was from India.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I, uh, meant, um,” he said, and then he hung up.

But other men are more lax about geographical boundaries.

At a bar in Manhattan: “I love Indians, Mexicans, Arabs—you know. I love how brown you are—not boring WASP white. Say, do you speak English?” This guy was really into brown. He loved slim brown boys with black hair and liquid eyes. “Tell me,” he said, “is there something in your culture that makes you all so graceful, you know, soft?” Well, so much for that butch look I thought I had per-

This is a substantially reworked and expanded version of an article that appeared in *Shakti Khabar* no. 17 (London, c. 1991), a newsletter for South Asian lesbians and gay men.

fect! But according to him Indian boys and Mexican women have a problem. As soon as they hit twenty-five, they go to pot. It all goes to the waist. “Must be all that rice you eat.” Well, when I hit twenty-five, I could still squeeze into my old jeans. But then I suppose I don’t count! I live in America and probably indulge in sneaky Westernized things like step aerobics and nonfat yogurt.

The curry queens of yore, those old colonial British sahibs, did it the hard way—they actually followed the spice trail to India. They went there with their big *sola topis* (pith helmets) and their khaki shorts and suffered through the heat and dust and malaria. But at least they went there, like E. M. Forster in India and T. E. Lawrence in the Arabian desert before they wrote about the dark-skinned, exotic natives and their pagan, exciting ways—doubly exciting after those cucumber sandwiches with a spot of tea. And it was no picnic at the seaside for them—Lawrence of Arabia was kidnapped and raped. As for Forster, who knows what really happened in those dark Marabar caves that scared his Miss Quested so in *Passage to India*.

But the American curry queens are in no rush to swat the flies and mosquitos. They know better than to follow mad dogs and Englishmen into the Indian sun. They would much rather have it brought to them, so they don’t have to take all those horrible shots and brave the sweaty Indian crowds. Anyway, there isn’t a decent gay bar in the whole Indian subcontinent, according to the International Gay Guide. Sometimes I wonder, “What is it about us that so excites these queens?” All that curry flowing in our veins? The smells of bazaars they’ve seen on the National Geographic specials? The mounds of golden turmeric and red chili powder piled by the roads? Kohl-eyed Indian boys slipping through the dusk, asking, “Massage, sahib?” We are all that in safely digestible doses, in capsule form. We give them the rush of fantasy India without the diarrhea and the danger: exotic but disinfected.

To be frank, I have nothing against these curry queens. Frequently, in a bar they are the only ones who bother to talk to me, let alone buy me a drink. And in a bar, after standing for one hour with a glassy half-smile feeling so bloody different, I am often glad of *any* attention I get. And then this man comes along and says, “Hi.” I feel resurrected, alive. Someone noticed me. So what if I’ve never seen a Judy Garland film? So what if I am neither blue-eyed nor blond? There’s someone smiling at me. And he may be into brown sugar.

If he has seen too much of *Far Pavilions* or *The Jewel in the Crown*, he’ll go for the exotic approach. He’ll admire your waistline. He’ll ask you how long you have been abroad. He’ll either compliment

you on your English or be delighted by your cute accent. And he'll say he once knew this Indian (or was it Iranian?) guy who cooked these divine curries. And do you know Jamshed—he was from Bombay too. All the while, he will be holding your brown fingers against his white ones and saying, "You know, someday I really want to go to India." So will you be his little palanquin bearer?

There is also what I call the intellectual approach. These guys have perhaps done the Taj Mahal circuit once or seen a documentary on TV: "Did you see that program on the Discovery Channel about that place where you throw corpses in the Ganges river and those crocodiles. . ." Then they will ask you about gay life in India: "So, are there gay bars in India?" Yes, I actually think there are people who have asked the same question to every gay South Asian they have picked up. It is not just conversation making. They honestly can't believe the answer. It seems inconceivable that there could be gay life without gay bars. It seems almost uncivilized. Perhaps they have been to India and wondered how gay men find each other in those teeming hordes of jostling humanity.

People, of course, are individuals, and not everyone follows this set script. It would be foolish to use this essay as a handy litmus test to check whether the guy smiling at you is interested in you as an individual or as Mowgli. It is merely a look at some of the attitudes that I have encountered in America. And really, I have no problems with people who are turned on by the smell of curry. In fact, more strength to them. The roots of this attraction may be a reliving of the empire-builder's arrogance or the wide-eyed adoration of all things Eastern, as in George Harrison. But as long as he doesn't expect me to clean his boots (*jaldi jaldi* [quickly quickly]) or perform levitation to amuse his friends, that's fine with me.

So now if I find someone feigning an interest in India because he is actually interested in me, I don't feel cheated. I feel almost flattered. The next step is, of course, to find out whether he is interested in me or my cute accent and quaint Indianisms, whether I am something to show off along with the other bargains he picked up in India—the ivory chess set and the Kashmiri rug. And more important, am I willing to play along?

Before anyone starts complaining about my typecasting all white men (if they didn't already start complaining five paragraphs back), let me add that there are plenty of men genuinely interested in India. Not every white man is indulging in a little bit of colonialism every time he beds an Indian. Some have devoted their lives to the study of Indian culture. They know more about Sanskrit, Indian history, and population control campaigns than I ever will. They have lived in hovels without electricity, trekked through miles of arid,

drought-stricken wastelands, campaigned beside villagers being dispossessed by an upcoming dam project. I have no reason to doubt their sincerity and genuine concern. My real problem lies with another class of curry queen.

He may be 40-plus or 50-plus. And every time he smiles, I wonder, "Am I the second choice?" After you are too old to lure blue-eyed blonds, do you turn to the Third World for your kicks? Did you have that same fascination for brown boys when you were twenty-five? Or is it a newfound passion that appeared with the love handles and the spreading bald patch?

I see him in the pages of Asian magazines. He offers his experience, his financial stability, for my youth. He wants me to be slim, smooth, and boyish. I wonder what will happen when I am no longer so slim, no longer so boyish. Will he just put in another ad for "a shy Asian, nineteen to twenty-five, not into the bar scene"? I see white men offering immigration help to young "friendly" Asian and Latino boys. I see little glossy books of naked wet Asian boys, and I wonder about the man who took these pictures using the powerful allure of his wallet to get some poor village boy to shed his clothes. Such a bargain too—given the current exchange rate for dollars! I wonder if that boy knows that for those few dollars, his brown, glistening, teenaged body is stocked on the shelves of gay bookstores all over the West.

It is, of course, undeniable that there is a tremendous amount of ageism in the gay community. Otherwise, why would people need to describe themselves as "forty-five years young" or "forties, looks early thirties"? And if the older white man is on the prowl for easier prey, that is his prerogative. After all, it will ultimately be my decision whether I let myself be lured into his arms. I am sure there are a lot of young Asian men who are genuinely looking for an older white man—perhaps for help with that green card, perhaps because of the financial stability, or perhaps because that is really what turns them on.

But more than the financial stability and immigration assistance, I fear that the white man is offering his whiteness. I have met many Asian men who will not sleep with another Asian. They feel that would be like sleeping with your own sister. They want to experience the American Gay culture; they want to taste something different. But I fear that is just whitewash, because, if that were so, there would be far more Asian men dating black men, Latino men, and Arab men.

We have come to this country to lose ourselves in the comforting anonymity of a land where no one knows our names—where our homosexuality (as long as we don't appear on TV) will not cause

shame and stigma to rain down on our families. We sometimes even take new names to fit our new identities—Shyamal becomes Sam, and Bhabesh becomes Bob. But the color of our skins is something we cannot hide with new names. In India I have seen women apply layers of herbal paste to coax their skins into lightening a shade. People inspect newborn babies and say, “Hmmm, looks like he’ll be quite dark.” The princes in our fairy tales were always tall and fair. It is hard for us to celebrate our tropical colors against this barrage of images—images that we buy into and perpetuate, even in India, where we were surrounded by brown-skinned people.

And then I come to America and find this rigid ladder of color with white on top and black on the bottom. And on a ladder there seems to be only one way to go—up. I have heard Indian men refer to African Americans in derogatory, dismissive terms. In a gay bar I once met a young Indian man who took great pride in the fact that the lightness of his skin made many people assume he was Mediterranean. Another Indian man complained that the only people who seemed to be attracted to him were black men. These attitudes seem to be reinforced by the gay community.

My first experience with the gay community was in the Midwest, where the ideals of beauty were corn-fed blue-eyed boys. As the only brown-skinned man in a bar, I became acutely conscious of the color of my skin, in a way I had never been in India. No one had to throw eggs at me. No one had to hurl racial slurs at me. I would just see those eyes look at me and through me and away from me, and I would feel put in my place. What I needed most at that time was attention. If any white man had come along then and offered it to me, I doubt that I could have refused him. All I wanted was to see myself reflected in his eyes as attractive, as desirable. He would make my long journey to America seem worthwhile.

Then one came along. He was a frustrated schoolteacher in a small town—an overweight man in his late thirties, with a closetful of mail-order porn. But he wanted me. He picked me up in his car and took me to his house. He had Chinese food delivered to his home, so his neighbors would not see us together in the restaurant and wonder who I was. I spent the longest night of my life curled up at the edge of his bed watching the flickering images of a blue movie (with the radio on to drown out the sound). He was fascinated by my skin, my hair. I can still hear his heavy breathing as he asked if he could bathe me. I was so scared I could only shake my head. In the morning, as he drove me home, I felt that in some way I had cheated him and let him down. I had wasted his Chinese dinner.

That day I asked myself what in the world I was doing with him when I felt no attraction to him whatsoever. Over the next few

months, I would run into him now and then. He always pretended not to recognize me. Perhaps he really did not—perhaps he had never really looked at my face. But I wanted to thank him for setting me free—free from the need for his approval, free from the desperation to have him desire me in order to feel wanted, real. He made me realize that I could say no, that just having him want me was not enough. I had to want him too, and even if no one else looked at me while I nursed that drink on the barstool, it was not the end of the world. I could finally see him for what he really was—a closeted, scared man wanting my brown body to take him on a magic carpet ride far away from a dreary routine of TV dinners and “soft rock with less talk” radio stations.

But I did not come here to give *him* that ride. That was not part of my job. Lying awake in his bed as the flickering images from the video washed over me, I realized he wanted me much, much more than I wanted him. It had taken all my courage to say, “No.” But once I did, the roof did not come crashing down. He did not throw me out in the middle of the night. He did not force his heavy blue-and-white-striped pajama-clad body on me. He even drove me home, as he had promised. It was the first time—in negotiating my desire in America—that I felt I had a choice, that my acquiescence didn’t have to be taken for granted, that I didn’t need to just quietly accept whatever was doled out to me because I was lucky to get anything at all. My doubts, my fears didn’t all dissipate at once in the morning sunshine. I didn’t swell up with self-confidence overnight. The need to be wanted, to be desired still remained—as it always will.

But sometimes in a crowded bar, a white man I am not attracted to in the least will smile and say I am cute. I just thank him and move on. It is true that I am brown, and he is white. This is his country, and I am the foreigner. But I do not have to be grateful for his attention. I am not in the business of giving magic carpet rides anymore. I have parked my life in America, *his* country. But it is *my* life, parked by *my* choice, and I have a say in it. I do not need him to validate my ticket.

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