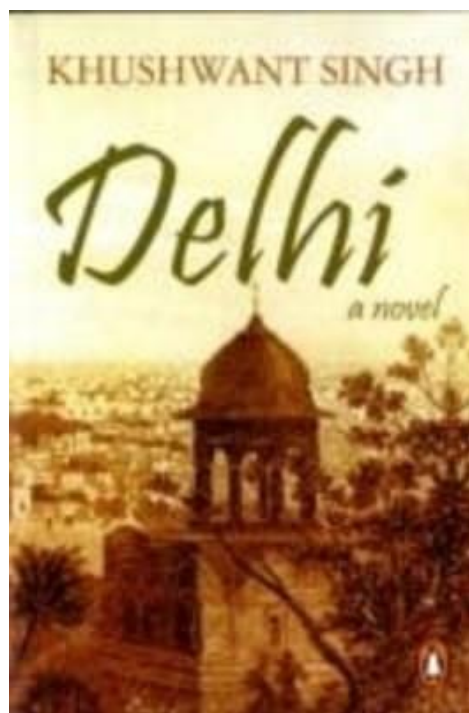


**Romancing the Third Gender:
Analysis of the Representation of the Transgender in
Delhi: A Novel, with Special Reference to
the Character of Bhagmati**

Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A, NET., SET.

=====



Abstract

In *Delhi : A Novel* Khushwant Singh has represented the history of Delhi through different voices. Various characters from different social milieu are brought together to give a successfully authentic account of the history of an ancient city in India which is now known as Delhi in the world-map. To keep the representation of history unbiased and lively, Singh has introduced the character of Bhagmati, a hermaphrodite, who binds the chapters of the novel together. Apart from the character of Bhagmati there are other transsexual historical characters in the novel who were an integral part of the history of Delhi. In this article I have tried to

highlight how Bhagmati and the other transsexual characters in the novel deconstruct the West's mythical concept of the celebrated acceptance of the transgenders in the non-Western culture. Characters like Bhagmati, Khusro Khan, Basant Ali Khan and Qutubuddin Mubarak Shah reside at the outskirts of the social periphery or in between the binary opposition of gender roles. But in the corpus of western thinking, it is commonly believed that the preindustrial or non-Western societies are more accepting or accommodating of erotic diversity and gender variation in comparison to the West. But this is only a romanticised myth which gets subverted in the novel.

Singh goes beyond stereotypes when he gives agency to Bhagmati at the end of the novel by giving her the power to save the life of the Sikh journalist during the time of communal riot of 1984. She turns out to be the most sane and humane human being who is ready to risk her life to save the person she loves. In the novel she is neither deified nor dehumanised; she is presented as a "normal" human being who knows how to express her views boldly.

Delhi and Bhagmati in Co-existence

“...although I detest living in Delhi and am ashamed of my liaison with Bhagmati, I cannot keep away from either for too long. In these pages I will explain the strange paradox of my lifelong, love-hate affair with the city and the woman.”(Singh, 2)

Thus begins Khushwant Singh's description in *Delhi : A Novel*, and the "woman" in the above lines is a hermaphrodite or hijra whom the narrator prefers to call "she". The character of Bhagmati has been paralleled with the dying city of Delhi which is no less uglier than her. But both of them have an appeal which is hard to ignore, and to realise it one has to "cultivate a sense of belonging to Delhi and an attachment to someone like Bhagmati" (Singh,1).

In this novel we find that Delhi and Bhagmati exist side by side, and both of them are strongly craved for by their admirers, like the ageing Sikh journalist of the novel. Apparently we may wonder how an old city like Delhi, having a great historical value, can be compared with a transgender who spits out slangs every now

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:2 February 2015

Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A, NET., SET.

Romancing the Third Gender: Analysis of the Representation of the Transgender in *Delhi: A Novel*, with Special Reference to the Character of Bhagmati

and then. But they are bound by one similarity – both of them have been long misused by rough people and so “they have learnt to conceal their seductive charms under a mask of repulsive ugliness” (Singh,1). Their worn-out condition parallels to the existence of Tiresius, the Greek mythical character who was cursed to bear the burden of a long tell-tale life in which he had to live as a man, as well as a woman.

Transgenders – Twin-Souled

In *True Selves*, Mildred L. Brown and Chloe Ann Rounsley assert that “transsexualism exists and has always existed”. Transgenders were considered ‘twin-souled’, with “knowledge of both male and female secrets”. Bhagmati in Khushwant Singh’s novel has been wittily presented to signify the structural unity of the novel. She is the binding force, and the spirit of the novel which entwines with the history of Delhi that has been narrated in the novel from different points of view. To avoid biased representations, Singh has introduced the character of a transgender who resides ‘in-between’ the binary gender roles and outside the social periphery, and therefore cannot be sullied by prejudice.

Demystifying Gender Roles

In the article, **Romancing the Transgender Native : Rethinking the Use of the “Third Gender” Concept**, Evan. B. Towle and Lynn. M. Morgan say, “The transgender native is portrayed not as a normal, fallible human being living within the gender constraints of his or her own society but as an appealing, exalted, transcendent being . . .” (Towle and Morgan,672). But Khushwant Singh has gone beyond that utopian representation. He presents Bhagmati as she really is – a ‘normal’ human being, living at the outskirts of the vortex of gender roles. *Delhi : A Novel* demystifies the West’s romanticised concept of the deification of the transgender in non-Western countries.

The Third Gender

The Transgenders in India have been the butt of ridicule and the ‘worth’ of their very existence is itself a big question mark! Though recently the transgenders have been given the recognition of the ‘third gender’, but still people do not spare

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:2 February 2015

Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A, NET., SET.

Romancing the Third Gender: Analysis of the Representation of the Transgender in *Delhi: A Novel*, with Special Reference to the Character of Bhagmati

them a thought or two except when they use the word “*hijra*” for badmouthing. In the month of April, 2014, Justice K. S. Radhakrishnan declared the transgenders to be the third gender in Indian law. The ruling says :

“Seldom, our society realises or cares to realise the trauma, agony and pain which the members of Transgender community undergo, nor appreciates the innate feelings of the members of the Transgender community, especially of those whose mind and body disown their biological sex. Our society often ridicules and abuses the Transgender community and in public places like railway stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theatres, hospitals, they are sidelined and treated as untouchables, forgetting the fact that the moral failure lies in the society's unwillingness to contain or embrace different gender identities and expressions, a mindset which we have to change.”

Hijra and Delhi: A Novel

The word ‘hijra’, an Urdu- Hindustani word, had been derived from the Semitic Arabic root ‘hjr’ which means “leaving one’s tribe”. The meaning gets reinforced when we find that the transgenders do not exist in the binary opposition; their existence is liminal or in-between. If we follow Indian history , we can find that the *hijdas* were considered eligible only to be pimps or the guards of the harems of the kings and nawabs. In *Delhi : A Novel*, there are snatches of examples of the transgenders here and there. But the way Singh has presented Bhagmati with her loving heart and honest expressions ,is quite different from the other historical representations of transgenders.

In this article I will try to highlight the representation of transgenders in *Delhi : A Novel* with special reference to Bhagmati who can also be regarded as the sutradhar of the novel who connects all the twenty-one chapters like a thread. Along with that we will also discuss how Bhagmati and the other transsexual characters in the novel deconstruct the West’s mythical concept of the celebrated acceptance of the transgenders in the non-Western culture.

“*In this novel*”, says Khushwant Singh, “I have tried to tell the story of Delhi from its earliest beginnings to the present times”. It is primarily a historical novel which has tried to highlight the major historical forces that have helped in shaping up Delhi. While going through the history of kingship, wars, mutinies, communal riots, *jihads*, sexual violence and lusty encounters, we also come to know about the existence of the eunuchs within the palaces who also had their meagre share in initiating the power game. But none of them had been at the centre of the power structure. They were at the periphery, except one Khusro Khan who became the centre of power for a very short period of time.

Khusro Khan

Khusro Khan was a Hindu Pavar boy who became the beloved of Sultan Qutubuddin Mubarak Shah and in the course of time became the ruler himself after slaying off the Sultan while they were engaged in a lusty love-making. Though Khusro Khan was not an eunuch, he can be put under the umbrella term of ‘transgender’. He was a boy of fair complexion, “gazelle-eyed with eyebrows curving like scimitars and buttocks as large as a woman’s” (Singh,76). The sultan took fancy in him and Khusro Khan started to colour his lips and to dress up like a woman. Qutubuddin Mubarak Shah who was his paramour gradually started to prefer to play the role of the beloved, and their roles began to get reversed very often. They became transvestites. But it was not morally acceptable; it resulted in death. In the corpus of western thinking, it is commonly believed that the preindustrial or non-Western societies are more accepting or accommodating of erotic diversity and gender variation in comparison to the West; but there is no doubt that it is romanticised to a certain extent, and the episode of Khusro Khan proves that.

Basant Ali Khan

Characters like the eunuch Basant Ali Khan align themselves with the power structure, by shifting their support from the powerful of the yesteryears to the upsurging waves of change. The *hijda* in Alice Aldwell’s narration is treacherous and sexually frustrated. In the narrative Aldwell has used the pronoun ‘he’ to refer to the eunuch, may be because ‘he’ was successful in exerting power over her. He acts like a pervert. Alice Aldwell comments :

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:2 February 2015

Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A, NET., SET.

Romancing the Third Gender: Analysis of the Representation of the Transgender in *Delhi: A Novel*, with Special Reference to the Character of Bhagmati

“What the hijdas lack in the real stuff they make up for by doing lots of other things” (Singh, 256).

But we must not forget that such behavioural pattern gets an impetus during riots or ‘*jihad*’. When everyone was busy extracting something or the other from the victims, the *hijra* had his fill of sexual gratification. The collective behavioural pattern decided his mode of behaviour. He was a small cog in the power structure; nevertheless he knew how to take advantage of the situation. He threatened Alice,

“If you breathe a word to the Mirza, I’ll slit the throats of your girls” (Singh, 256).

It seems villainous at one hand, but on the other we realise that everyone is struggling within his/her own periphery to come to the centre which is denied to him/her. In between ‘his’ and ‘her’ lies the slash in which lies someone’s existence and identity which we are intentionally and perpetually oblivious about.

A Bit of Both

The Lal Kuan is the fixed abode of the eunuchs of Delhi. This is the only place where Bhagmati used to return after the day’s work. This is where she found her identity. To earn her living she had to take up the profession of a prostitute. But Bhagmati too belonged to a family. When she was born in Victoria Zenana Hospital, her father was eager to know whether the infant was a boy or a girl. But he did not get any answer. When Bhagmati became four years old, the doctor told her father,

“I am not sure; it is a bit of both” (Singh,29).

Though she was named Bhagmati, the pronoun ‘it’ was thought to be suitable for her. Her twilight existence was not accepted in the respectable society. She was handed over to a troupe of *hijras*; her father told them -

“Now, I have three sons and two daughters, you can take this one. It is one of you” (Singh, 29).

Bhagmati's identity was announced thus, and, she began her journey within this peripheral bound. In Chapter three of the novel, while discussing the various types of *hijdas* Singh puts forth some poignant lines about such peripheral presence --

“The reason why they prefer to wear women's clothes is because it being a man's world every deviation from accepted standards of masculinity are regarded as unmanly. Women are more generous” (Singh, 29).

How lucidly in these two lines the writer has voiced the reality of the working of sexual politics! Anyone who doesn't resemble the subject at the centre becomes the 'other'. Wearing women's clothes has at least qualified Bhagmati to be referred to as 'she' which is a much 'privileged' pronoun than "it".

The Bonding

In the novel, the narrator says that he is ashamed of his liaison with Bhagmati, but the readers know very well that the bonding between them is something beyond explanation. Bhagmati was once saved by the Sikh journalist who found her lying on the Ridge Road; she had an epileptic fit and was taken care of by the journalist. From then onwards, they came very close to each other. In spite of the fact that Bhagmati was “the plainest-looking whore in Delhi” (Singh, 28), they developed a relationship which initially may seem to be based on perverse physical appetite, but with further insight we can realise that their relationship was quite natural and devoid of any complexities. Bhagmati, apparently a self-possessed prostitute, did care for the well-being of her saviour. She has a keen understanding of humanity; and we find in the novel that it is Bhagmati who saves the narrator's life at the end. When everyone in Delhi was busy killing each other, it seems that Bhagmati was the only person in the whole city who was able to preserve her sanity. She could not see any reason behind such murderous tortures that the people were inflicting on each other. During the anti-Sikh riot in 1984, Bhagmati rushes in the flat of the Sikh journalist to save him --

“*Toba! Toba!* What I have seen with my own eyes, may no one ever behold! They are killing every Sikh they see on the road, burning their taxis, trucks, scooters . . . I am going to take you to

Lal Kuan. Nobody will bend a hair on a *hijda*'s head. *Chalo.*" (Singh, 387)

Prefer to Die in Delhi

Bhagmati who had been the butt of jokes in the society, takes the lead here. If we read between the lines, her declaration that nobody would bend a hair on a *hijda*'s head echoes the disarming acceptance of her exclusion from the social circle. But Bhagmati loves Delhi ; she and the narrator are bound by their love for Delhi. If they want to go far away from the din and bustle of Delhi at one moment, on the other they feel a much greater pull towards the city. Bhagmati wishes to die in Delhi, and tells the narrator,

"I hope you will take my ashes and throw them to Ganga." (Singh, 380)

Gone Beyond the Stereotypes

We hardly prefer to accept that transgenders like Bhagmati are 'normal' human beings with emotions, but Khushwant Singh has gone beyond the stereotypes to present the character of Bhagmati with different contours and colours. Bhagmati is outspoken, plain-looking with worst dressing style, dominant and yet docile, caring and above all humane, and the readers are surely to develop a 'liaison' with her once they know her inside out.

At the end of the novel we find that Bhagmati has grown old like the worn-out city of Delhi. Sans teeth, she is the exact personification of Delhi which has witnessed many power politics and violence; but both of them are 'sterile'. They are unable to gain power over their own existence and identity; but unlike Delhi , Bhagmati can exert her will to save the person whom she loves. Armed with her sexuality and common sense, she is perfectly 'normal' . She is neither deified nor dehumanised. Thus the representation of her character has subverted the West's romanticised concept of the third gender utopia in the East, and along with that Khushwant Singh has also proved that co-existence doesn't necessarily depend on any sort of exoticism or romanticism ; rather, it comes from mutual respect ,acceptance and understanding .

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:2 February 2015

Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A, NET., SET.

Romancing the Third Gender: Analysis of the Representation of the Transgender in *Delhi: A Novel*, with Special Reference to the Character of Bhagmati

Works Cited

Mildred L. Brown and Chloe Ann Rounsley *True Selves : Understanding Transsexualism - For Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals*. Jossey-Bass, 1996.

www.ifge.org/books/true_selves.htm

Singh , Khushwant. *Delhi : A Novel*. Noida: Penguin Books Ltd , 1990. Print

Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan. **Romancing the Transgender Native : Rethinking the Use of the “Third Gender” Concept** : *GLQ : A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2002) 8(4) : 469-497 ; doi: 10.1215/ 10642684-8-4-469.

www.policy.hu/takacs/courses/ . . . / RomancingTheTransgenderNative.pdf

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijra_\(South-Asia\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijra_(South-Asia))



Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A., NET, SET. Research Scholar
Department of English
Tripura University
(A Central University)
Suryamaninagar 799022
Tripura (west)
India
suvizimu@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **15:2 February 2015**

Ms. Subhra Roy, M.A, NET., SET.

Romancing the Third Gender: Analysis of the Representation of the Transgender in *Delhi: A Novel*, with Special Reference to the Character of Bhagmati