

TRANSCENDING BINARIES: THE HIJRA PERSPECTIVE IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S DELHI

Raushan Kumar ,Research scholar

Dept of English, LNMU Darbhanga,

Email id: rkshridhar1993@gmail.com

Dr Anjani Kumar, Associate professor

G.D. College, Begusarai,

Email id: kumarprofanjani@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender identity and sexual orientation are intrinsic phenomena of human identity, yet they are often limited to the binary heteronormative notion under societal, cultural, and historical constructions. In contemporary literary studies, they have gained visibility, but still these notions could not find their place in mainstream socio-political realm. By the end of twentieth century, numerous prominent Indian authors started to confront traditional gender roles through their literary works. Khushwant Singh is one such author who is well known for his iconoclastic nature of dealing with his subjects in his works, and his novel “*Delhi*” is one of them. This novel delves into alternatives to the conventional man-woman relationship. The narrative emphasizes on an unnamed protagonist, identified only as Mr. Singh, and Bhagmati, a hijra from Delhi. The central focus of this research paper is to extract the queer narrative established in this work of fiction and to study how Khushwant Singh breaks down traditional gender dichotomies through the character of Bhagmati, a hijra. Bhagmati manifests a non-binary identity that eclipses standardized allocation of masculinity/femininity, purity/impurity, and power/submission. As a hijra, Bhagmati exists in a space of liminality, defying the essentialist framework of society. This study interrogates how does the perspective of non-binary person, embodied by Bhagmati, subvert conventional gender paradigms, and illuminate the fluidity of identity. Through a hermeneutic engagement with the text, this paper aims to decipher the ways in which hijra’s non-binary identity becomes an allegory for the pliability of history, culture, and selfhood.

Keywords: Queer, Hijra Identity, Gender Fluidity, Liminality, Marginalization, LGBTQ, Delhi, The Third Gender and Non-Normative Sexuality

Introduction:

In India, eunuchs—also referred to as hijras—represent a distinct and intricate group with a long history that is intricately woven into the nation's social, religious, and cultural fabric. They have lived here for generations. The term "hijra" refers to a broad category of people who may be transgender, intersex, or have undergone castration. In Vinay Lal's definition, India's hijra community is comprised of people who are “described variously in scholarly and popular literature alike as eunuchs, transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals, hermaphrodites, androgynes, transsexuals, and gynemimetics” (1999: 119). If we cast a look into the history of these people, we find a very unjust brutal history and the fact behind. Due to the power dynamics in some civilizations and historical eras, eunuchs were vulnerable to abuse, such as forced castration and slavery. In certain historical settings, people were castrated against their will; this was frequently the consequence of societal or governmental

pressures. A drawback of the eunuchs' past is their lack of physical autonomy. People from many cultures have misunderstood and misrepresented eunuchs. Stereotypes and derogatory depictions in books and the media have helped to keep prejudiced ideas about their identities alive. In 2014, hijras were acknowledged by the Supreme Court of India as a "third gender," confirming their freedom to identify as something other than male or female. An important first step in recognizing the identity and rights of eunuchs in India was this legislative acknowledgment. Even with official acknowledgment, eunuchs frequently experience prejudice and deep-rooted social stigma. Their marginalization is a result of prejudice and ignorance, which influences their access to healthcare, work opportunities, and education, among other areas of their existence. Social exclusion is a common occurrence for eunuchs, resulting in their seclusion from mainstream society. Their chances of advancing economically and socially have been hampered by discrimination in socio-political and educational institutions.

Identity of any kind plays pivotal role in the life of a person, and when it comes to gender identity it becomes most essential part of one's sense of self. It started from the very moment of the birth. Every activity, personal relationship, appearance, goal, and position in the society is determined by that gender. No civilization has ever defined or created a suitable space for those who do not fit into these normalised genders as male and female. As in the case of Bhagmati's gender, when doctor says "I am not sure; it is a bit of both." (Singh, 29) Throughout the civilised history of mankind, gender is categorized into two divisions and hailed as universal truth, when any individual's gender identity does not match with both divisions are either forced to fit into that division or simply assumed as eccentric. As discussed by Susan Stryker in *Transgender History*:

"For most people, there is a sense of congruence between the category one has been assigned to and trained in, and what one considers oneself to be. Transgender people demonstrate that this is not always the case that is possible to form a sense of oneself as not like other members of the gender one has been assigned to, or to think of one as properly belonging to another gender category. Thus, gender is only one of many possible social identities, with each identity representing one's psychological relationship to a particular social category in which one has membership."

It can be asserted that gender is just one kind of socially constructed identity, and everyone's identity is based on how they perceive themselves. Hijras, who have existed for centuries, challenge the notion of binary by personifying a fluid, socially recognised gender role that is neither precisely male nor female. This study will apply queer theory to analyse how Bhagmati functions as a gender outlaw while diminishing boundaries from social, sexual, and literary norms.

Delhi: A Novel

The present paper examines the portrayal of transgender perspective in the semi-historical, semi-autobiographical fiction by Khushwant Singh. The novel under discussion is *Delhi: A Novel* which revolves around an intersexed transwoman Bhagmati. Khushwant Singh's manifestation of Bhagmati in this novel brings the question of role and identity of non-normative gender into mainstream literary studies in India. Apart from Bhagmati, there are some historical characters in the novel who present the transsexual perspectives as their integral phenomena based on their ambiguous gender roles. Through the deep analysis of these characters, in this article, I have tried to bring out the ambiguous and non-essentialist elements of these characters which were and still are stigmatized in different parts of world. The notion of ambiguity and the state of dilemma can be observed easily in the very starting of the narrative as Khushwant Singh writes:

“I make Delhi and Bhagmati sound very mysterious. The truth is that I am somewhat confused in my thoughts.” (Singh, 2)

Through the narrative of Bhagmati, Singh opposes fixed gender divisions, disclosing the social, psychological, and physical hardships of hijras in a patriarchal society. This research article explores Bhagmati's bodily experiences, identity crisis, and psychological unrest through the lenses of queer and non-binary theories.

Literature Review:

India has been a country which gave a certain place to the hijra community that can be understood through historical and mythological references. Although, Indian literature, mostly, remained ignorant towards alternative gender identities. There are very few existing studies which put light on queer and non-binary theories in Indian context. In *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2000), Ruth Vanitha and Saleem Kidwai have analysed homoerotic and the fluidity of sexual orientation of pre-colonial India. They added in their studies that hijras were not always marginalised but were once revered. Their study mainly focuses on historical aspects. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), which features, Anjum, a protagonist who searches her identity, but this narrative does not attempt to engage deeply with deconstruction of gender binaries that we see in *Delhi* through Bhagmati's character. Serena Nanda's *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1999) one of the seminal anthropological studies on hijras have provided cultural insights of the hijra communities, their rituals, but does not address the literary portrayals of hijras. As we can see there are very little amount of engagement in literature which showcased how Bhagmati challenges gender binaries through both her psychological and physical identity. This article is an attempt to fill the gap by interpreting Bhagmati's character through a theoretical lens, combining insights from Judith Butler (1999-200), Homi K Bhabha (1955-200), and Sedgwick (1955-200), to understand how *Delhi* critiques the rigidity of gender norms.

Bhagmati as a Gender Outlaw:

Bhagmati's queer and obscure identity has been explained in the very beginning of the novel, as the protagonist says:

“I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati when I have had my fill of whoring in foreign lands. Delhi and Bhagmati have a lot in common. Having been long used by rough people...” (Singh, 1.)

Here it can be observed that Bhagmati, being a hijra which is supposed to be excluded from the heteronormative gender binary, is mentioned with the female pronoun to call particularly her. As the narratives unfolds further, we get to know about the queered life of Bhagmati. She tells Mr Singh about herself which mirrors the fateful lives of the hijra community in our civilised society. After her birth, no one was sure of her gender, doctor too said it is a bit of both. Her father handed her over to a member of hijra community. The narrator gives a detailed description of Bhagmati's rising anxiety and crisis of her actual identity as she starts to sense of gender identity. As she:

“began to grow hair on her upper lip, round her chin and on her chest. Her bosom and hips which were bigger than a boy's did not grow as big as those of girls of her age. But she began to menstruate. And although her clitoris became large, the rest of her genitals developed like those of a woman...” (Singh, 29.)

She is growing up among “troupe of hijras” and learning their ways to clap and wander streets to streets. Further we get know about queer lifestyle of Bhagmati that:

“When she was fifteen, the leader of the troupe took her as his wife. He already had two hijra wives... Later they often made love to her.” (Singh, 29.)

As our civilization provided only suitable profession to hijra people, that is prostitution, so that they may provide something to the society which is regulated by patriarchal mindset. Khushwant Singh well exposed the deception and hypocrisy of the civilised people towards the transgender community. He discloses their fetishes:

“When men came to expend their lust on hijras – it is surprising how many prefer them to women – Bhagmati ... could give herself as a woman; she could give herself as a boy. She also discovered that some men preferred to be treated as women. (Singh, 30.)

Even Mr Singh, the narrator, had to received criticism for having relationship with Bhagmati by his colleagues and caretaker Budh Singh as he says:

“Take woman, take boy – okay! But a hijra! That’s not nice. Don’t mind my saying so!” (Singh, 6.)

These descriptions reflect that Bhagmati occupies an ambiguous “third space”, not exactly a complete man or a complete woman, existing in a liminal zone where societal norms blur. This notion of liminality is beautifully explained by anthropologist Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1969), which describes individuals of groups who find their identity in an “in-between” phase, overhauling unyielding social frameworks. Bhagmati is shown in the way narrator perceives her. he oscillates between attraction and repulsion, never fully embracing her as a woman, yet never entirely rejecting her either. This discord underscores her liminal identity, validates Judith Butler’s discourse that “gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act of ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’.” (Gender Trouble, 1990). Bhagmati’s self-presentation, her gestures, mannerisms, and sexuality, constitutes an active gender performance that transcends societal binary categorization.

Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of “Hybridity” and “Third space,” as explained in *The Location of Culture* (1994), though it focuses on the cultural and political structure, but it can be interpreted in such a way to understand the strife of third gender, provide another useful paradigm for unravelling how Bhagmati’s identity subverts binary gender constructs. Bhabha’s “Third space” is not merely a site of ambiguity, it is also a space of resistance. By occupying a position outside the traditional gender binary, Bhagmati challenges the very foundations of gender norms. She constantly navigates and negotiates her identities in relation to societal expectations and her own internal sense of self. This negotiating can be both challenging and empowering, leading to the establishment of unique and multifaceted identities that defy binary categorisation. Bhagmati occupies a third space position since she does not completely belong to or can be completely separated from mainstream gender concepts. The men she seduces create additional complexity within her multi-layered identity because she attracts their attention but she faces social discrimination because of her interracial status. Through the narrator’s mixed set of emotions about Bhagmati’ we observe how social structures respond to hybridity with fear.

The psychological struggles of Bhagmati stem from constant societal rejection. As a hijra, she dwells outside the accepted binary of male and female, which makes her subject to ostracization, ridicule, and systematic exclusion. This rejection is not merely social but deeply personal, affecting her relationships, her sense of self, and emotional stability. When the narrator too turns against Bhagmati when social expectations force him to do so. Mr. Singh chides her,

“And be seen with you in public? You want me to cut off my own nose?”

Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), describes social alienation as a primary source of psychological trauma, emphasizing that those whose identities are not recognised or validated suffer from chronic distress. Her struggle is compounded by the paradox of visibility – she is hyper-visible as a hijra but invisible as an individual deserving of dignity and agency. We see in the novel when Budh Singh neglected her opinion because of her ambiguous gender:

“So you are neutral, *hain*? If you were a man or a woman you would have been on one side or the other.” (Singh, 122.)

People’s inhuman treatment of Bhagmati mirrors the real-life experiences of hijras, who are often treated as exotic or grotesque rather than as complete individuals.

Works cited

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.
Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Wadsworth Publishing, 1999.
Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*. New York, Ny, seal Press, 2017.