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Sex, Sexuality and Gender in the Delhi Metro Trains: A Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract
This paper explores the way sex, sexuality and gender are constructed in Delhi, India by using a semiotic understanding of reality whereby an individual is thought of as being subjectivized due to his being embedded in the socio-semantic text of a city full of signs which he/she interprets and constructs his identity through such a hermeneutical act. Within this socio-semantic text that the individual interprets, there are various determiners of interpretation and gender is one of them. This paper is a semiotic analysis of the text made by the collection of signs in the Delhi Metro trains. The purpose of this essay is to determine the ways in which the citizens of Delhi think of sex, sexuality and gender and analyze the ways in which these notions are reproduced on a daily basis through microcosmic texts like these signs in the Delhi metro trains.

[**Keywords**: LGBT, Delhi Metro, identity, sex.]

Introduction: A "bookish" understanding of reality

The idea of a book serves as an appropriate metaphor for a semiotic understanding of "reality". In such an understanding, both a book and reality are texts or collections of signs that the individual subject interprets though his faculties of interpretation, conditioned through his identity. However, it must be kept in mind that the text of reality and the interpreter are porous categories which constantly pour into and mould each other i.e., while the subject's interpretation constantly reproduces reality, the very tools of perception that the subject has are shaped by social factors or determiners (that which the act of perception/interpretation will then go on to reproduce), creating a circular rather than a linear or causal model of the creation of the self and society. A circle has no origin, which is why it is virtually impossible to pinpoint which came first; the self or the social, *parole* or *langue*, the chicken or the egg.

There are various determiners that influence this hermeneutical act of creation of meaning and being which are spread out throughout the text of reality, both inside the individual and outside in the society. In elemental terms, one could say that the primary schools of cultural criticism (like Feminism, Marxism, Post Colonialism etc.) are oriented primarily to the study of one such determiner of interpretation each and then through that determiner they postulate about this entire process. (For example, a post-colonial school of criticism could focus on the significance of the determiner of race or ethnicity in the meaning created in a cultural artifact (like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*), through which it would then go on to postulate larger theories about how this is

connected to the ways in which people generated "meaning" and modes of being in the socio-cultural semantic realities from which this text emerged (In the case of the *Things Fall Apart*, this would perhaps refer to the interpretative communities of pre and post colonization Nigeria).

Ideas about these determinants of interpretation do not magically emerge hierarchically from "centers" of power (like the state, or the church or the police) as was thought traditionally. Foucault's thought shows us that epistemic regimes of discursivity rather operate in a more web like layered manner (Foucault 1980). It would thus be wise to rechristen these erstwhile "centers" of authority as "lenses" of authority. They should be thought of as convex lenses which concentrate certain ways of orienting these determinants onto the society in which they exist at a given time. When the individual comes into being in this socio-semantic space, his/her ways of interpreting it and orienting his/her self are influenced by such lenses of authority. Barthes' essay, *The Death of the Author* argues that reading a text while keeping in mind what the author must have meant is a kind of censorship or policing of meaning (Barthes 1978). Such a reading of a text restricts whatever meanings one might have produced. The writer figure should be thought of simply as the conductor of the textual symphony rather than its composer. If we transpose this argument onto the semantic text of reality, then just like the prominence of the intentional fallacy in the creation of meaning in the reading of a book, individuals in society too are usually influenced in their acts of interpretation of reality by the "author"otative lenses of power discussed above. Revolution in this sense would be a radical new interpretation of this text of reality that defies the meanings generated if one dutifully orients one's interpretations in accordance with these lenses of "author"ity .

This paper's focus is not to expound in detail on such a semiotic understanding of being and reality, but rather to focus on a particular determinant within this larger process; that of gender and sexuality in a specific context. This paper has three sections, in which I wish to first present a semiotic-theoretical way to look at some of the ways in which gender operates in society, then in the second part, to elaborate on that through a semiotic study of the Delhi Metro trains and finally in the third part, to meditate on possible ways of reorienting (and through that transforming) this determinant of interpretation in a less rigid manner.

Section 1 : A semiotic understanding of Sex, Sexuality and Gender

One must first define the three basic terms of sex, sexuality and gender before providing a semiotic reading of their functioning. *Sex* refers simply to the biological sexual organs in our bodies. *Sexuality* on the other hand is a sociological category at the intersection of the personal and the social, and only some of the criteria that come under sexuality are directly influenced by one's sex, while others are simply assumed to be so. *Sexuality* should be thought of as a larger determining term, a term of posturing, rather than the usual narrow connotations of it being associated merely with the sex of one's sexual

partners. At the personal level, sexuality involves aspects of performativity[1] (Butler 1990); the ways in which we posture and represent ourselves through things like speech-acts and dress. None of these are causally linked to our sexual organs, yet it is largely believed that if one has a penis (biological criteria), then one is "masculine" (sociological criteria) and must wear trousers rather than skirts. At the social level, sexuality determines the ways in which we enter into relations with other humans forming bonds of kinship through which societies get formed. This social aspect involves sexual intercourse, among other things. However, one must remember that sexual intercourse is very different from reproduction. While reproduction necessarily involves the pairing together of a female with a male, the idea that sexual intercourse too is biologically dependent on such a pairing is largely a cultural myth. Finally, *Gender* would be the combined process of *sex* and *sexuality* being enacted in society; a mode of orientation, a determiner in the process of creating one's identity and interpreting reality.

Usually, lenses of "author"ity project only two possible modes of such orientation; the masculine and the feminine, which are expected to enter into heterosexual relations with each other, through which a whole host of other socio-economic relations are established. The normative way of reading the text of reality (i.e. reading it through "author"itative lenses of power) involves orienting one's self into one of these totalizing, rigid binaries. Most languages only have feminine and masculine signifiers (this paper too ends up falling into that rhetoric whenever I end up using "his/her" as general pronouns). This categorization is so fundamental to our ideas of identity that after birth, an infant's gender is the first thing that people question about, as if this were the most primary of "natural" categories. It is also absolutely fundamental in the ways one perceives the world, so much so that even non-biological entities like cars and guns get genderized. As Barthes would've said, these cultural lenses of power *naturalize* the purely *historical* gender binary (Barthes 1972). However chinks have appeared in this totalizing binary armor of gender at various points of history, ranging from ancient Eastern mythologies to modern Western popular culture (the musical genre of 'glam metal' that originated in the West in the 1980s presented men of bands like Motley Crue and Twister Sister that dressed up in a "feminine" manner with long straight hair, nail paint and tight clothes, yet projected themselves as the forerunners of aggressive "masculine" metal music). Through androgyny, one begins to enter into areas that create a sort of fluidity in the rigidity of gender binaries. However in so far as androgyny is in a way, a synthesis of the "thesis" of masculinity and the "antithesis" of feminity, it still operates within the rhetoric of normative social interpretations. Beyond this lie the myriad radical interpretative realities of alternative sexualities, of which the LGBTs, transvestites, transgenders and asexuals are only some. To have a normative reading of reality in terms of gender, is to think of heteronormative, conjugal and controlled sexualities as the naturalized order of things, while to be queer is to step out of this rigid authorial interpretation of reality and to

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[1] Judith Butler's illuminating book *Gender Trouble* argues that while gender is thought to be an ontologically essentialist criteria, it is in fact a performative one and has no ontological basis. For her, 'male', 'female', 'heterosexual', 'homosexual' etc are not definers of our selves but rather performances that we carry out in the social arena.

embrace the plethora of interpretations that lie beyond. To be queer is to create meaning on a more personalized, authentic level. There is an urgent need today to make people realize that not just homosexuals or transgenders, but anyone engaging in "unnatural" sexual practices (even a man and a women performing oral sex on each other) are non-normative and hence "queer".

Section 2 : A case study of the Delhi Metro trains

If one thinks of the city of Delhi as a social text, then we the citizens are the individual units that make it up. "Delhi" exists because we continuously reproduce ideas of Delhi in our minds. The metro trains act as the veins of this system which facilitate our movement to different parts of the geographical Delhi where we go and engage in a plethora of actions and relations with other "Delhites" like us. Through this we constantly produce and reproduce what "Delhi" the city is, based on our daily interpretation of the semiotic realities within this geographical location. A study then of a microcosmic unit- the Delhi metro trains, in terms of gender should help us understand our ideas of gender that work in the larger macrocosmic text of Delhi. Such a semiotic analysis should be easy I think primarily because the metro trains have emerged recently (which is why we know for a fact that they haven't always existed and the ways of being that have cultivated in them aren't *natural* but *historical*) and also because they are full of easily recognizable visible signs everywhere (for example, the signs that tell the commuters where to go to catch a particular train.)

The moment one enters a metro station, one is bombarded with a multitude of signs that tell us to posture ourselves in particular ways. These signs, by ordering us, orient our interpretations as well. The first thing that one is supposed to do if one wishes to travel on this train is to get frisked at the security counter. At this very initial step, we automatically bifurcate from a multitude of Delhites into male and female Delhites. The very spatialization of a subject in the city depends on normative gender binaries. If the security guards are a representative of the lenses of power, then they create "order" by first focusing us separately into the two dominant genders. It must be noted that I am not arguing against security checks. My point is simply an observation that the primary, "obvious" way in which we create order from chaos in terms of a mass of people is to divide them into male and female. Next then, is the security checking itself. Men must get frisked by men while women by women only. A person that shares your *sex* is allowed to caress your body as it is *natural* to assume that people of the same sex can never be sexual towards each other, which is why there is no risk of molestation in homo-bodily contact. If a man were to frisk a woman however, there would be a widespread outrage as hetero-bodily contact is always naturally connoted with sexual threat. The initial bifurcation into male and female is constantly reinforced through various signs. First is such a visual sign -

(Image 1)

Next, and the most important is an auditory sign, the P.A. announcement system both on the station and inside the trains. This is very interesting, as a body-less voice emerging from above our heads, ordering us to stand here and not there, to get off here and not there etc. evokes residual, primordial ideas of a divine voice emerging from the skies, guiding a herd of clueless people. Cultural deities usually get anthropomorphized, based on what the culture considers to be their standard of the human figure. The voice in the Metro does not really have such overt religious connotations, yet what must be noted is that this voice is designed so that the "standard" commuter can relate to it and can understand its commands. Having a voice with a French accent here would be absolutely absurd. This voice in the Metro works on the basis of an intersection of two binaries; male/female and English/Hindi. A "male" voice first issues directions in Hindi, after which a "female" voice translates that same command into English. (It must be noted that these voices themselves aren't male or female, for all we know it could be two transgendered people issuing those commands, however we *naturally* perceive those voices as male and female). The voice's interlocking of these two rigid binaries (male/female and Hindi/English) reflects what we in Delhi think to be the "standard" of the figure of the Delhi citizen. A Delhite, for us must be either male or female and must speak either English or Hindi. Anything that falls outside of this – transgenders, Hijras, non English, non Hindi speaking "outsiders" like some North-Eastern Indians or Tibetans, or "foreigners" like Africans, are essentially not people who we consider to be a part of our version of the "Delhite". Every time we enter the Metro and hear this voice, we are subconsciously conditioned again and again about this standardization of identity within "our" culture. This is why the people ("queers" and "foreigners") who fall outside of this ideal of humanity in Delhi are the ones which constantly have to face attacks which have in fact been rising in recent times. Conservatives, who argue in favor of such attacks, usually allege that "these people" are against our "culture" and our "tradition" and these signs in the metro constantly remind us what lies within our culture and what lies outside.

Apart from this constant reinforcement of "male" and "female", there are also a series of signs that tell us the normative ways in which these two bifurcated groups must establish relations with each other. Whenever the male visual signifier (from image 1) is evoked, it is always in a context of either agency or deviancy. If a sign has to guide the commuters onto stairs or elevators or platforms, it is always presented only with the male visual signifier with a directional arrow and linguistic text of the location in question, associating the male with movement and with agency –

(Image 2)

Conversely whenever a signifier has to signify a form of non movement or a repression of an illegal movement or deviancy, then too a male visual signifier gets evoked –

(Image 3)

(Image 4)

Women on the other hand are associated with non agency and non movement, so questions of deviancy automatically disappear. The female visual signifier (from image 1) occurs most prominently outside the women-only coaches –

(image 5)

These signs constantly try to restrict women to particular locations in the train, either the women's only compartments or the few seats in each of the rest of the compartments. Their movement is always confined to specified locations, retarding any form of agency. This visual sign also obviously forces one to look at the "pinkness" and "floweriness" that we are expected to associate with women. Women are fragile, rooted flowers that must be confined, watched, pruned and moderated otherwise they run the risk of being trampled under the all-moving feet of the men. Men are aggressive agents and deviants from which flowery non agential women *naturally* need protection. Again it must be noted that I am not arguing against the creation of the women-only coaches. I realize that molestation in the trains is a reality and this coach helps in preventing that to a certain degree but what I am really bothered by is the *naturalness* that we associate with this idea that if men and women are put together in a confined space, then some of the males are bound to molest the females. Even at the moment of security checking, while men are frisked in the open, there are curtains and panels that hide the spectacle that would be a woman caressing another woman for the male gaze. If this *Lihaf* or quilt as Ismat Chugtai would've called it is removed then men, the agents might *naturally* get aroused and exercise their agency over the women. Delhi is the nation's rape capital and our signs in the metro constantly make sure that we do not forget the *naturalness* that we associate with this basic idea of male agency running the risk of spilling over female passivity at every moment of ourwaking lives.

Section 3: Meditations on possible ways of reform

After such an analysis, one must ask, what now? Having decoded how signs in the metro gender us daily, one must ask the fundamental question at stake here; how do we go about normalizing a radical, queer new interpretation of the text of Delhi. Do we start tearing down these signs in the metro? Do we start sending men into ladies' compartments and women into toilets designated for men? Do we tear down the barriers that divide us into male and female when we stand in lines? Do we, in short, start engaging in Queer terrorism? Will this Queerism dismantle the very fabric of our society? Undoubtedly it will. But our societies have witnessed that time and again. Every

status quo- be it sexism or slavery are termed as "natural" by their supporters who also simultaneously term all their opposers as "anarchists" and "terrorists". Only gradually, through a systematic rigorous form of protest (not necessarily physical violence) do these alternate interpretations of the text of social reality get accepted. How this process of making a queer interpretation of Delhi acceptable to the traditional "authors" of this text is what needs our urgent attention. Usually a new interpretation follows three stages before being accepted; introduction into public discourse, denial and discrimination by traditionalists and finally acceptance. The final stage of acceptance does not always happen. When it does happen, it happens only when a society together as a whole undergoes a phenomenal change in the ways they perceive reality. Usually romanticization of the new interpretations works in sensitivizing the public towards such an end. Romanticization in the sense that the plight of the oppressed must first be highlighted, after which their struggle must be glorified and actively represented as "heroism". In terms of an example, think of India's colonial struggle. If Delhi in the eighteenth century was largely interpreted through a British lens, then only through decades of romanticization of the radical new interpretation of this text through a newly constructed lens of "Indian-ness", did the idea of Delhi start to transform. Freedom fighters and Indian nationalists were romanticized as heroes sacrificing their lives, trying to create a new "Delhi", a new "India", free from the clutches of British imperialism. We today think of this nationalist romanticization as natural and timeless, but it was undoubtedly, consciously constructed at that time. Public sympathy usually caters to romantic, sacrificial heroism. The problem with the Queer movement today is that the representation of its current forms of protest fail to create such an idea of heroism in the layman's mind. The most visible form of Queer protest in Delhi today is the Pride Parade that happens once a year. To laymen, this movement appears as a bunch of colorful frolicking youngsters who are influenced by "Western" ideas that are horrific for "our" Indian culture. So this queer interpretation of our social text is still at stage two i.e. the stage of its denial. In order to take it to stage three of acceptance, we need to meditate on ways that will radically transform this interpretation of the queer figure. First, as I said, we need to expand the term "queer" to include not just homosexuals and Hijras but all of us who do not conform to the legal idea of what "natural" sex and sexualities are. After this, we need to make this figure of the queer individual seem genuinely tragic and heroic, something like the feminist and anti-apartheid movements managed to do in the West with their particular subjects[2]. I do not have the answers, but what I am trying to suggest here is that perhaps there is an urgent need to transform the very questions that we need to tackle.

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[2] The recent NALSA judgement granting constitutional rights to trasgendered persons is undoubtedly a radical step towards the creation of a queer utopia but it undoubtedly represents a ruptured, fragmented progress as the Supreme Court still holds valid section 377 that criminalizes non-heterosexual sexualities of any kind.

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