

Review article

The Politics of Gender Hybrid Representation of Delhi

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Abstract

The growth of the metropolitan phenomenon has resulted in the emergence of new power centres in all the countries of the world. These cities have geographical, political and economic significance. The narratives of these cities have been captured by the writers since centuries in their fictional and non-fictional work. The research intends to focus on the representation of the city of Delhi in two prominent works: Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Both the texts are located in the city of Delhi and have a prominent transgender character in its core and the study aims to understand the writer's intent and manner of drawing similarities between the city and the character. It also proposes to explore this hybridity of gender as a deliberate tool to represent the city of Delhi. The failure of any one binary to capture the essence of the city and the advantage of the androgynous approach will be discussed in the paper. It will also endeavour to understand how the phenomenon of cities has led to the creation of spaces that promote hybridity.

Keywords: Delhi, transgender, spaces, androgyny

Introduction

A city can be geographically referred to a space defined by the latitude and longitude on a map, but the definition would be as mundane as a world without arts. The relevance of arts in the present rampage of technology can never be emphasized enough. The world more than ever now needs a refuge that the creative folds can render that need to be preserved. In Urban Geography, Economics and Architecture cities are approached with different aspects and tools for understanding and planning, but literature depicts and attempts to capture the fleeting soul of cities. The topographical and geographical details are significant for the understanding and writers like Flaubert, Hugo, Balzac, and Dickens have made the city alive for their readers with descriptions in their works. The research intends to study the portrayal of city in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It will also understand the politics of the gendered representation of the city as a transgender.

Michel Lussault's (2005) in his essay "What is a city?" emphasizes that in order to comprehend the idea of a city, we need to understand the need for the city and further expounds

that the juncture of society and culture as 'the city'. The cities have never been a general phenomenon but are rather an expression of collective ways of thinking, especially for a community to deal with its fundamental issues. Lussault has identified the need of the cities in three ways; the cities and urbanization result from economic and functional necessity, secondly, the need of interaction and economic exchange, and thirdly because it foregrounds the need of political, institutional and administrative imperative which leads to the need of a community or urbanisation in the form of a city. Cities have, therefore become intersectant places of multifaceted and the dynamic worldwide and neighbourhood interconnections that have the ability to create different political, social and economic spaces. Cities cannot be viewed as a one-dimensional phenomenon and have to be understood with all the variant underlining themes and ideas that characterise its reality.

The portrayal of the cities in literature has centred on issues pertaining to its origin, emergence, evolution and most importantly the spirit of the city, give a glimpse in the life of people living/ lived in it and most importantly focuses on how the space is reflected in their life and how they are manifested in the image of the city. This space as represented in literature is read by dedicated flâneurs, and it is in their works that cities have come alive. Burton Pike in his essay asserts that the city, even if artfully written is not identical but trimmings of the real world. (Pike) Paris, London, New York, Berlin, Tokyo, Dublin, St. Petersburg, Mumbai are few of the many megacities of the world which have captured the imagination of the writers and the readers.

The research has attempted to address the representation of city in the gendered nature with reference to two texts based on the city of Delhi. The discourse of urban geography has been through the lens of male and the 'gendered representation' attempts to investigate the deliberate representation of Delhi as 'transgender' in the selected works for the research. Delhi has been the capital of many empires and its history covers a span of over fifteen centuries, including the ravaging and plundering by the invaders. The research has selected for the same purpose two writers who located their novels in the city of Delhi. The reason for the selection of these texts is that both these novels have a transgender as a significant character in the novel that further led to the conjecture that the hybridity of gender in the representation is a deliberate intent of the writer.

The Alluring Bhagmati in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel*

Bhagmati emerges as one of the most alluring depictions of hijras in Indian writing in English. She is the heroine of *Delhi: A Novel* by Khushwant Singh which can be rightly called an epic of the modern times. It is a masterpiece which weaves ten plots which start from 1265 A.D. to 1985 A.D. and presents all the significant incidents that have shaped the sensibility of the present-day Delhi. The narrator/ protagonist of the novel is a person who sets the story going with his landing in Delhi, where he becomes a guide as he knows the city well. The narrator constantly switches roles to become different characters due to which there is fluidity in both narrative technique and plot. The novel draws comparisons between his mistress, Bhagmati (hermaphrodite) and the city of Delhi. The reason is that they both have been exploited by rough people and hence they hide their 'seductive charms' under a disgusting ugliness.

The noise, dirty and narrow lanes of Delhi have been compared to the unattractive and even repelling personality of Bhagmati, which may disgust a person at first but later compels him to submit to the charms of both. The narrator confessed in the novel that though he detested living in the city of Delhi and in the same vein confesses of his embarrassment of the affair with Bhagmati,

he still acknowledges that he could not keep away from both. Thus, his life becomes, in his words, “a love-hate affair with the city and the woman.” (Singh, 2005, p 2)

Khushwant Singh in *Delhi: a novel*, intertwines his love and hate for the city and Bhagmati. In fact, they become interlaced and as he unravels the layered history of Delhi, Bhagmati keeps appearing at strategic points in the text. The novel introduces the narrator who gives an account of the trips he makes with an American Lady Hoity-Toity to some historic sites of Delhi as a guide. She is a royal guest who stays at Rashtrapati Bhawan and had come to Delhi to collect material for a book on archaeology. He takes her around and it is evident that he enjoys the company of women and that flirting is his forte. One of the most captivating characters is Bhagmati, who is portrayed as to be a repulsive *hijda* from Lal Kuan. The narrator proceeds to describe how he had first met her, when in an epileptic fit, he had brought her to his apartment from the road where she was lying in a semi-conscious state. The real journey into the history of Delhi starts when the narrator and Bhagmati visit Jahaz Mahal. The reader is taken way back to 1265 A.D. when Delhi was ruled by Sultan Ghiasuddin Balban. The narrator here is a clerk called Musaddi Lal who takes us on his life journey (right from his child-marriage to his old years), and in the process he very masterfully sews in the influence of Hazrat Nizamuddin, the wrath of Ameer Khusrao and the passing over of the kingdom from Balban to Khiljis. Musaddi describes how his miserable life was put in order with the blessings of Nizamuddin who was a famous Sufi saint, popularly known as Khwaja Sahib. The Sufi element is developed in this episode when the saint is brought to the king to be punished and in his justification, Khwaja Sahib says:

We Sufis love God and no one else. When we are possessed by the divine spirit, we utter words which to common man may sound like the assumption of godhood. But these should not be taken seriously. You may have heard the story of the dove that would not submit to her mate. In his passion the male bird said, “If you do not give in to me, I shall turn the throne of Solomon upside down.” The breeze carried his words to Solomon. He summoned the dove and asked it to explain itself. The dove replied, “O Prophet of Allah! The words of lovers should not be bandied about.” (Singh, 2005, p 57)

Thus, the writer has tried to show the spiritual fervor that pervaded the spirit of the Sufis and their love for God and at the same time he has used the character of Musaddi Lal and the saint to show the gradual the building of Mughal Empire in Delhi.

There are poignant moments in the text that celebrate Bhagmati as an individual and human, and not by her present state, especially during the anti-Sikh riots after which the whole city seemed possessed by hatred and violence, she is unable to understand the reason for the same. She cannot stop herself from trying to save the narrator, who is also a Sikh. She exclaims:

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, 2005, p. 387)

Her spirit and soul are invariably entwined with the city of Delhi, who is willing to save despite being ransacked by the same people. Her sense of humanity emerges in the time of peril and she is more human than any man or woman. The novel is cyclic as it began with the narrator admiring the city and Bhagmati and ending where there is a reference to a ‘toothless Bhagmati’.

Arundhati Roy’s Anjum in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Anjum was born as Aftab as the fourth of five children in Shahjahanabad, the walled city of Delhi. The parents had been waiting for a baby boy for six years after three girls. The midwife declared the 'birth of a boy', an error which was understandable. The next day when the mother explored the tiny parts of the baby boy, she discovered 'his boy-parts', a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl part' (Roy, 2017, p8). The novelist then realistically captures the fear of a mother in a step-by-step reaction: the first was to feel her heart tighten and her bones turn to ash, the second was to take another look to be sure, the third was to recoil from what she had created while her bowels constricted and the fifth was to pick up the baby and hold it close while feeling as if she was falling in an abyss. Jahanara Beghum had known that there was a gender for every living entity, except for what now she held in her arms. She decided to tell this to nobody and keep the secret buried in her heart. The novel tells us how the parents deal with the stress of upbringing a transgender. The mother starts visiting the dargah of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed unaware of the story of the saint. He was a Jewish Armenian merchant who had travelled to Delhi from Persia pursuing the love of his life who was a young boy Abhay Chand. He was persecuted on the steps of Jama Masjid on the charge of denial of the existence of Allah. But as he was beheaded, his hands picked up the head and he continued to chant poems of love and went to heaven. Beghum prayed to him to teach her how to love him and he did. As he grew, he sang with the grace and elegance of a courtesan. Aftab's father Mulaqat Ali who was a hakim was much more progressive in his approach. He scolded his wife for not telling him earlier and believed that modern medicines could "cure" his son. When they consulted a doctor, he said that Aftab as a Hermaphrodite, with both male and female characteristics. He assured that surgery would help cure a part of it but his tendencies might not change. Ali cut off his other expenses and borrowed money from relatives for his surgeries. Aftab stopped going to school and spent his time at home.

The novel shows how they are isolated and ostracized. He spent his time peeping outside the window and noticed a hijra. His heart leaped with excitement and he yearned to be at the house of hijras, which was ironically called "Khwabgah" (House of Dreams). At first, they resisted him, but his persistence defeated their resistance. Its residents included Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo, Mary and Gudiya. In a poignant moment, Nimmo tells Aftab that God made Hijras 'as an experiment...he decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So, he made us' (Roy, 2017, p 23). Aftab fails to understand her pain but then lives a life that makes the statement sound true.

The turmoil is not only emotional but physical too. As Aftab entered the teenage years, he noticed that his body started to get masculine traits, like growth of body hair, change in voice and he became taller and muscular. Aftab changed her name to Anjum and became the disciple of Ustad Kulsoom Bi of the Delhi Gharana (one of the seven Hijra Gharanas of the country). Anjum became Delhi's most famous Hijra and eventually film makers fought over her, NGOs hoarded her and her number was exchanged with foreign embassies. The interviewers hogged her to understand the cruel reactions of the relatives and parents but Anjum had a story contradictory to others. She underwent two corrective operations to enhance her lady parts, but despite medicines and operations she was unable to completely transform herself. As the years progressed, Anjum felt a yearning to be a mother. God granted her wish as she found a lost child on the steps of the Jama Masjid. She tried to find her lost parents but efforts failed and her wish fulfilled.

The novel has epic dimensions as it starts from the story of Anjum and forays into other social evils that plague modern India. It includes issues like caste system, terrorism, Naxalite's violence and many others. Anjum becomes a part of the plot which the writer uses to portray the Gujrat violence. Anjum witnesses the madness of the riots that has tarnished the unity of Hindus

and Muslims. Anjum was then unable to go back to her normal life; she became a paranoid and started to cling to her adopted daughter. When she was forced to take medication by her friends, she decided to leave Khwabgarh.

She started to live in a graveyard, where her parents were buried. It was a ravaged place that housed the dead and was a place of solace for the relatives of the dead. The municipal authorities kept sticking notices but none had the courage to meddle with her. “They did not want the curse of a Hijra” (Roy, 2017, p 67). She started building rooms and named her guest house “Jannat” (Paradise). In due course of time, this place became the place of safety of the ostracized. It became the place of hiding for Tilo (who was in love with a terrorist) and Miss Jebeen (an infant found while protesting at Jantar Mantar). Anjum’s life comes to peace at the end as she looks at her guest house with Miss Jebeen perched at her hips.

The inner peace of Anjum comes with Miss Jebeen, it is juxtaposed with the external turmoil of numerous kind: caste, society, personal and national. She becomes a metaphor for the troubled country that has accepted the multifarious nature of its population and its troubles and yet looks forward with hope perched on its waist in the form of a young child.

Conclusion:

The attempt of both the writers is the realistic portrayal of the city of Delhi, the deliberate selection of a transgender character as a protagonist for the text is an aspect to be explored. This section of the society has been ridiculed, caricatured and marginalized by the society. Despite their place in the religion, the acceptance has been less, which has resulted in the deplorable conditions and deteriorating mental condition of the transgenders.

- The politics of selection seems to be their rejection of the binaries of male and female (lack of belongingness).
- This positions them uniquely and ironically to be a part of both and hence this becomes their unique vantage point.
- The hybridity in gender ensures malleability in discourse and the representation. It blasts the hierarchy of the patriarchy and at the same time the victimization of women.
- The marginalization is evident in both the texts, in Bhagmati and Anjum, but they have an indomitable spirit that defeats the society. Delhi, in this sense becomes one with Bhagmati and Anjum: its honour was invaded, it was reduced from glory to ashes and still re-emerged like a phoenix.
- The ‘androgyny’ captures the beauty of the two, which individually both fail to portray.

Thus, the connotation of the city of the Delhi being compared to a transgender may be due to their exploitation, both physical and emotional. But the unique aspect of this is both the characters are not presented as defeated, despite all the circumstances, they emerge truly triumphant restoring our faith in humanity amidst the violence and chaos of the present times. These cities are spaces and through these spaces our essential humanity, in its tattered form can be preserved. Cities, therefore become destinations of complex and constantly shifting local and worldwide interconnections that have the capability to create different spaces for not only monetary, social, political structures, but important culturally hybrid spaces. Cities cannot be perceived from any one viewpoint, and hence, must be understood with different points,

underlining themes, ideas and characters that showcase its reality. It must be understood from multiple points of view and gender emerges as one such vantage point.

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