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Navigating the Third Space: Khushwant Singh's *Bhagmati* and Arundhati Roy's *Anjum*

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Abstract

The society has been divided in the broad categories of male and female. The transgender has been isolated and pushed to the margins of the society. The paper endeavors a non-straight perspective to reveal the problematic of representing sexual categories and brings forth the range of complexity. The classification of individuals in society has always been hierarchical. The research intends to study the portrayal of the transgender in the works of two eminent Indian English writers: Khushwant Singh's Delhi and Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. The study has focused on their conditions, the reaction of their families, their lives and the attitude of the society towards them. It studies the archetypes and myths associated with them and their influence on the collective conscious of the society. It intends to create a better understanding of their state which will lead to empathy and work towards an inclusive and stable social structure.

Keywords: *transgender, society, space*

The society has always been divided in the rigid categories of male and female. The people within it are classified in categories dictated by hierarchal structure. The twentieth century



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witnessed the emergence of movements that supported the rights and identity of those who were ostracised. The process of urbanization played a crucial role in the emergence and understanding of the marginalized. When the population reached a particular density, the individuals established a communicative relationship which eventually led to the emergence of new forms of group identification. The roots of these radical movements can be traced to the nineteenth century. That era saw an explosion in new scientific knowledge and social sciences. This was crucial as the emphasis of categorizing and scrutinizing people for proper functioning of the society. Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, History and all other disciplines provided parameters and norms where society was dictated and divided into categories: non-whites, women, religious minorities, working class and others.

The attempt is to interpret literature with a non-straight perspective. It reveals the problematic quality of representing sexual categories and brings forth the range of complexity. The classification of individuals is always hierarchical. White/ non-white, homosexual/ heterosexual, male/ female distinguish and privilege one over the other, in which one term is lacking the characteristics of the other. The paper attempts to understand two novels: Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The attempt is not to trace the significance and the focus of the text, but only the representation of the transgender. Both the texts have a character who exemplifies the same. They have been strategically selected as Bhagmati is Hindu and Anjum is Muslim. The research attempts to understand the lives of the transgender through the selected works. It also intends to study how the society treats them. The research attempts to study and amalgamate individual identity issues with broader social constructs to arrive at a more compatible and stable social structure. It will help decipher their relationships with their families and society. It facilitates the understanding of the psychology of the transgender and will help to create empathy and understanding of the



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same. It aims at creating a better social structure by the inclusion of the misinterpreted and misunderstood.

The twentieth century witnessed a change in the form of protest and articulated their views and raised fundamental issues. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) are invaluable studies, indispensable to understand the case of feminism. Gender theory is indebted to these early twentieth century feminist writers who questioned the differential nature of socially prescribed roles. In fact, the observation, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" sums up the entire feminist perspective. Since 1970s, there has been a proliferation of feminist writings. Feminism is multicultural and diasporic. It is a proven fact that women have been subjected to patriarchal oppression. But the nature of their experiences and exploitation has been different and is governed by facts like class, color, race, nationality, religion and others.

Since the last decade of the twentieth century, especially in countries like France, it has led to radical offshoots like lesbian, gay and queer critical theories. Marriage is not restricted to men with women. Lesbian and gay theory emerged as a distinctive field in 1990s. If gender is the fundamental category of analysis and understanding in feminist theories, sex and sexual orientation is the fundamental category in lesbian/ gay theories. Within the broader sphere of lesbianism, there emerged a less existentialist notion which came to be called queer theory. Gay and lesbian critics call themselves queer critics. The selection of the term is deliberate as this homophobic term is not meant as an insult but an assertion with vengeance. 'Queer' is an all umbrella term which seeks to unite categories and create unity. It was a term first used in late 1980s as a term for uniting AIDS activists. By 1990s "Queer Theory" had taken a radical political energy and converted into a philosophical/ academic language and applied it to the interpretation to a variety of cultural forms (Malpas 112).



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Understanding Transgender

The American Psychological Association defines transgender as:

Persons whose gender identity; gender expression or behavior does not necessarily conform to that associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth. Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female or something else; gender expression refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, and voice or body characteristics. (<http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.aspx>)

The popular culture has referred to them constantly and there has been a whirlwind of activities. "Trans" is an umbrella phrase usually used for "genderqueer" people, to male-to-female and female-to male transsexuals, to non-conforming folk, to drag kings and queens, to cross dressers, to a large range of people who do not identify with the sex assigned on their birth certificates and to everyone and anyone else in between the sex binary (4). Transgender people, their experiences and ideology force us to rethink not only of their position but also rethink and ponder over people who do not fit in the dictated categories.

It becomes imperative to distinguish between the sexual orientation and gender representation. Sexual orientation is not determined by gender and hence a man can be sexually attracted to another man and yet at the same time does not have to pretend to be a female. The society works with assumptions that in homosexual relationships one of the partners has to



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behave/ act/ dress as the other gender. The truth is that women don't have to appear as males to be attracted to other women. The sexual orientation is independent of the gender. The American Psychological Association clarifies that, "Sexual orientation refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted. Categories of sexual orientation typically have included the following: 1) attraction to members of one's own sex (gay men or lesbians), 2) attraction to members of the other sex (heterosexuals), and 3) attraction to members of both sexes (bisexuals)." (APA)

For very long, the transgender have been relegated to the margins of Indian writing in English. Not many writers of mainstream fiction in India have attempted to honestly portray them. They have either been ridiculed or sensationalized for specific purpose in the fictional texts. The research attempts to understand the lives and behaviour of the transgender in the selected texts of eminent Indian writers of India. The dearth of sincere and unbiased depiction of the transgender calls for a closer analysis of their depiction.

Indian ancient texts like the Vedas refer to three different categories on the basis of one's prakriti (tendency). Transgender also find a mention in Kamasutra (4th century AD) as tritiya-prakriti (third nature). The foundation of Hindu law, the *Manu Smriti* (200BC- 200 AD) explains the evolution of the three sexes, "A male child is produced by a quantity of male seed, a female child by the prevalence of female; if both are equal, a third-sex child or boy or boy and girl twins are produced; if either are weak or deficient in quantity, a failure in conception results."

In *Ramayana*, it is believed that while Lord Ram asked all men and women to return after they were following him to the forest for exile, he did not refer to the hijras and hence they continued to wait for him. When he returned after fourteen long years, he found them still waiting and hence impressed by their devotion he blessed them with the ability to confer blessings on occasions. In *Mahabharata* too, not only Shikhandi, who though was a prince had a



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soul of a woman, but Arjun, the greatest warrior of all, too, had to spend one year as a eunuch because he was cursed by Urvashi. Thus the appearance of the characters showed acceptance but the Indian literature and cinema of the twentieth did not do justice to their tribe.

The Enticing and Amorous Bhagmati

Bhagmati emerges as one of most alluring depiction 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 in it. It is a masterpiece which weaves ten plots which start from 1265 A.D. to 1985 A.D. and covers all the events that have shaped 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 switches roles to become emperor and a commoner with perfect ease and perfection. The novel compares the narrator's mistress, Bhagmati (hermaphrodite) with 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 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. His first account is 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



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archaeology. He takes her around and it is evident that he enjoys the company of women and that flirting is his forte. Then enters Bhagmati, the most prominent character of the novel, a dark and scruffy *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 narrator, thereafter, takes Bhagmati to Jahaz Mahal, where an inscribed stone catches his eye, and thus starts the real history of Delhi. 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. Mussadi 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." (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 Mussadi Lal and the saint to show the gradual the building of Mughal Empire in Delhi.



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There are poignant moments in the text that celebrate Bhagmati as an individual and human, and not by her present state

Harmony in Turmoil: Arundhati Roy's Anjum

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 underneath 'his boy-parts', a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl part' (8). The novelist then realistically captures the fear of a mother. Roy describes her first reaction was to feel her heart constrict and her bones turn to ash. Her second reaction was to take another look to be sure. Her third reaction was to recoil from what she had created while her bowels constricted. Her fifth reaction 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



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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’ (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). Over the years Anjum became Delhi’s most famous Hijra. 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, Naxalites 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



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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” (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.

Contemporary theorists have intentionally stressed in role reversal which has led to greater malleability in society. These discourses have created, argued, resisted and argued for inversion of power structures in the society. There are romanticized versions of stories about the non –western world in the developed societies. The mythological or archetypal images generate an understanding in one’s mind about the acceptance and reverence of the transgender. But the complete aversion to a real one or shunning shows we have still not accepted them.

They have been suppressed, caricatured and ridiculed by the society. This community has been victimized by the society despite their glorification in religion. It helps in understanding the psychology of the society. The lack of understanding and empathy has resulted in increased



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suicides and deteriorating mental condition of transgender. Awareness will eventually lead to create acceptance. There has been positive impact of the decriminalizing of homosexuality in India which will in long term create an atmosphere of tolerance and social equality.

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