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Alternate Gender on the Canvas of History: A Study of Khushwant Singh's *Delhi*

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Abstract:

Gender is a contested sign among various sexual identity claims and one can be a male, female, buche-femme, cisgender, berdache, transsexual, transvestite, cross-dresser or in short 'queer'. The term queer which literally means 'strange', or 'not-normal' comes to mean a gender other than a male or female in the normative sense of the world. However, all these so-called non-normative sexualities are grouped under the acronym LGBTQ that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Queer. In context of multiple genders subsumed under the umbrella term LGBTQ, the Supreme Court has recently recognized the category of 'third gender' breaking the dual gender construct of 'man' and 'woman' that has pervaded Indian law. Nevertheless, this decision is not just the outcome of one petition filed by the Lawyers Collective on behalf of Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, a transgender rights activist but a result of many years of LGBTQ activism that started breaking the stoic silence of society over the existence of these diverse sexualities roughly around 1980s.

By the 1990s, many important Indian writers started infringing the conventions of being male or female through their writings. The fictional work *Delhi* written by Khushwant Singh is one such effort that explores the alternate to hitherto idealized man-woman relationship. The story is about an anonymous narrator referred to as Mr. Singh and Bhagmati, a transgender woman of Delhi. The book elicits some fascinating possibilities as it displays a non-normative person's visibility and interaction with society rather than the usual element of queer novels where a gender queer person is essentially under covers and cannot dare to be public. The paper proposed to be presented not just analyzes the representation of an intersex person measured against the quotient of masculinity and femininity, rather it also analyzes how realistic does its portrayal look and what points make it a queer text. Since the novel is set in Delhi so the paper also endeavour to explore Delhi as a dwelling place of hijras in its history as well as in 1990s, the publication year of the fictional work.

Keywords: Queer, Hijra, LGBTQ, The Third Gender, Delhi, Non-normative Sexuality and Alteranate Gender.

Gender is a contested sign among various sexual identity claims. One may be a male, female, buche-femme, cisgender, berdache, transsexual, transvestite or in short 'queer' which literally means 'strange', or 'not-normal'. However, in the context of one's gender the word queer comes to mean other than male or female in the normative sense of the word. Gradually, over the years, the expression 'queer' has subsumed multiple genders while debunking the stable sexes, genders and sexualities. Likewise, Queer Theory, since its first inception by Italian feminist and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis in 1990 has steadily emerged as an academic discourse that largely replaced gay and lesbian studies (McCann and Kim 483). Today, it takes into its purview the queer readings of the texts and the theorization of 'queerness' itself. In the words of Suzanna Danuta Walters, "Queer Theory . . . positions itself as a challenge to the obvious categories (man, woman, latina, jew, butch, femme), oppositions (man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual), or equations (gender = sex) upon which conventional notions of sexuality and identity rely" (484). However, the locale of this theory is constantly in flux and the term queer remains amorphous and still emergent.

LGBTQ (acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) activism has acquainted us with discrete sexualities, which cross the gender binary. Generally, people recognize gender or rather genders in plurality. Every now and then, we register something about these sexual outcastes, be it their surrogacy rights, right to personal autonomy and self-determination. In a path-breaking judgement, the Supreme Court has affirmed the constitutional rights and freedom of transgender persons, including those who are identified as third gender and those who identify with a gender opposite to their biological sex assigned at the time of birth. By recognizing the third gender, the Court has broken the dual gender construct of 'man' and 'woman' that has pervaded Indian law. Justices K. S. Radhakrishnan and A. K. Sikri on 15th April 2014 gave the judgment in the case of National Legal Services Authority versus Union of India & Ors. vide writ petition no. 400 (Civil) of September, 2012 filed by National Legal Services Authority (NALSA). The writ petition sought various directions from the Supreme Court, including granting of equal rights and protection to transgender persons. It has also required guidelines on inclusion of a third category in one's identity documents like the election card, passport and driving license.

The Lawyers Collective had filed an intervention, on behalf of Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, a transgender rights activist seeking recognition of self-identified gender of persons, either as male/female or third gender based on their choice. As a result, as per directions of the apex court the third gender is to be considered in OBC category from now onwards and this also implies educational and employment reservation for them. However, this decision is not just the outcome of one petition but rather it is the result of many years of LGBTQ activism. The struggle started breaking the stoic silence of society over the existence of these diverse sexualities roughly around 1980s. By the 1990s, the LGBTQ movement became massive and many authors started infringing the conventions of being male or female through their writings.

The fictional work *Delhi* written by late Khushwant Singh is one such effort that explores the alternate to hitherto idealized man-woman relationship. The story is about an anonymous narrator referred to as Mr. Singh and Bhagmati, a transgender woman of Delhi. The book elicits some fascinating possibilities as it displays a non-normative person's visibility and interaction with society rather than the usual element of queer novels where a gender queer person is essentially under covers and cannot dare to be public. This paper not just analyze the representation of an intersex person measured against the quotient of masculinity and femininity, rather it also analyzes how realistic does its portrayal look and what points make it a queer text. Since the novel is set in Delhi so the paper will also endeavour to explore Delhi as a dwelling place of hijras in its history as well as in 1990s, the publication year of the fictional work.

Khushwant Singh (1915-2014) was one of the greatest and significant literary personalities in the Post-Colonial Indian English Literature. Perhaps, he is the most controversial and widely read writer until now. He has earned name and international reputation as a journalist and columnist also. Alongside, he is known for his number of unforgettable works like *Train To Pakistan* (1956), *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959), *The Company of Women* (1999) and *Delhi*—the author's magnum-opus (1990). It is one of his historical novels that addresses the subject of alternate sexuality interwoven with the history of the city. The writer took more than twenty-five years to complete and publish this masterpiece. He himself writes in the Foreword to the paperback edition, "I put it all I had in me as a writer: love, lust, sex, hate, vendetta and violence – and above all, tears."

The novel brings to light the buried queer history of Indian historical figures from kings to their court poets belonging to Hindu as well as Muslim communities. The work highlights Khushwant Singh's unique skill of blending history, romance and sex of different time lines. In the work, Singh re-visions history that subverts the official view and offers a critique of the conventional historiography. He records the major chronicled events that shaped Delhi over a period of six hundred years ranging from Ghiasuddin Balban to the assassination of Indira Gandhi leading to the massacre of Sikhs. On this journey, narrators keep on changing and they meet many people like emperors, eunuchs, poets, prostitutes, saints and soldiers (Bheemappa 1). Some of the significant periods and episodes beginning with reigns of the rulers of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are also highlighted. Various narrators of the story describe the rise of emperors one after the other, the glory and fall of poets, the saints and their majesty, the sahibs and their affairs, the untouchables and many other historical figures who participated in creating the splendour and cosmopolitan appeal of contemporary Delhi. The writer shows how India and particularly Delhi was disrobed of its majesty by the foreign rulers and how after every attack it rebuilt its grandeur on its ruins. In addition, the narrative provides alternate sexualities a historical depth to draw upon and also puts forth many close historical antecedents of Bhagmati—the queer pivotal figure of the novel.

Delhi and Bhagmati– the story of these two life passions of Mr. Singh is spiced up with various incidents involving huge plethora of characters. The main story has interesting incidents interwoven around characters like V.V. I. P. Lady J. Hoity Toity, Georgine, Budh Singh and his journalist friends whereas the historical part has legendary figures like the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, Persian king Nadir Shah and famous Delhi poet Meer Taqi Meer. Along with these legends, many small characters with the queer bent of sexuality are also portrayed. The writer impresses the reader with his learning when in the course of the story, the narrator Mr. Singh becomes a tourist guide who has a story for every monument and anecdote for every king, his dynasty, and its queer side. However, since the story is mainly about Bhagmati– a “hijda” (the writer uses this term instead of commonly used ‘hijra’) therefore, before delving deep into the critical analysis of the novel, it is requisite to comprehend the phenomenon of ‘hijrahood’ in Indian context.

There are many myths, legends, rituals, religious roles and themes prevalent in Hinduism and Islamic culture, which entertain the notion of “sexually ambiguous or dual gender manifestations” (Nanda 20). In *Mahabharata*– the Hindu epic, hijras point to the following story involving Arjuna as their model.

Yudhisthira, one of the Pandava brothers, is seduced by his enemies into a game of dice in which the stake is that the defeated party should go with his brothers into exile for 12 years and remain incognito for the 13th year. The Pandavas lose and go into exile as required. When the 13th year comes around, Yudhisthira asks Arjuna what disguise he will take up for the 13th year in order to remain undiscovered. Arjuna answers that he will hide himself in the guise of a eunuch and serve the ladies of the court. He describes how he will spend the year, wearing white conch shell bangles, braiding his hair like a woman, dressing in female attire, engaging in menial works in the inner apartments of the queens, and teaching the women of the court singing and dancing. (Nanda 30)

Eunuchs all over India consider Bahuchara Mataas their patron and visit her temple located at Varakhdiwala in Gujarat, to seek her blessings. They suppose that she is the incarnation of Mother Durga. Eunuchs firmly believe, “they are cursed with nonfunctional gender due to their sins. By seeking her blessings, they hope that *Mata* will forgive them and bless them with a clear gender, either of a man or woman in the next life” (Saxena 24). The following story is associated with the Goddess:

She was once travelling through a dense forest. Finding her alone, a man tried to rape her. She cursed him with impotence. The man begged for her forgiveness and requested her to free him from the curse. She agreed to pardon him, only if he went into the woods and acted like a woman. (25)

Other than these, there are a number of mythical figures such as ‘ardhnarishwara’ and ‘Shikhandi’ in Hindu sacred texts. However, not only in Hinduism but clear references pertaining to hijras are found in Islam and in many other religions also. Where Hinduism mainly assigned them religious roles, Islamic culture also kept them in high esteem. They were offered positions such as confidantes of Muslim rulers, guards of mosque treasure and royal harems. It was a conviction among Muslims that the inability of eunuchs to reproduce influences their loyalty considerably and hence important roles were assigned to them. Their occupation as guards of women visiting mosques started from the site of the Prophet Muhammad’s tomb in Medina, and moved on to the site of the symbolic centre of Islam in Mecca. Even today, one can find eunuchs on both the sites (Saxena 7 and Loh 35).

Notably, there are a number of terms used for referring to hijras like, aravani, aruvani, chakka, khusra, kinnar, thirunangai, napunsak etc. (Saxena 6). However, ‘hijra’ is relatively a better-known term, which crosses the fences of ‘gender’ as well as that of ‘sex’. In Hindi language, the word ‘hijra’ comes from Urdu root word ‘hiz’ meaning ‘effeminate,’ though its etymology is traceable to Persian also. The English language equivalent of the term ‘hijra’ is ‘Eunuch’ which has etymological roots in Middle English word ‘eunuk’, Latin word ‘*eunuchus*’, the Greek ‘*eunouchos*’, ‘*eunc*’ i.e. bed and ‘*echein*’ which means ‘to have’ or ‘have charge of’. The Oxford English dictionary defines the word as:

1. A castrated human male.
2. Such a man employed as harem guard or in certain (mainly Eastern) monarchies (e.g. late Roman and Chinese Emperors) as court or state officials.
3. A man who is not inclined to marry and procreate.

The English word ‘eunuch’ or ‘hermaphrodite’ conveys the sense of ‘castration’ and therefore both these words invoke images of loss and feminization of gender. Conversely, Indian word ‘hijra’ represents a community, which comprises of “born” hijras and not “made” by the act of castration (Saxena 5). Thus, there is no equivalent expression to Indian hijras and hence Indian hijrahood cannot be defined fully in the context of eunuchs and hermaphrodites.

With the given prior analytics on Indian hijrahood, now it is possible to analyze the novel presenting a unique story of a queer protagonist Bhagmati dwelling in Delhi. She was born to parents having three male children already and unable to decide her sex, they gave her a feminine name. The doctor declared that he was not sure about her sex since her genitals were “a bit of both” (Singh 29). After a few years, just at the age of four, her parents disown her and give her away to a “troupe of *hijdas*”. Handing her over to them, her father remarks, “Now I have three sons and two daughters, you can take this one. It is one of you” (29). Later in the story, Bhagmati is presented as growing up among hijras and learning their ways. The writer elaborates her life and through this portrayal, it becomes evident that the lives of hijras are in constant struggle to get a foothold in this heterosexual society.

Members of the troupe taught “her to sing, clap her hands and dance in the manner of hijdas”. We come to know that physically Bhagmati grows up like a normal girl until the age of thirteen, then “her voice broke and became like a man’s. She began to grow hair on upper lip, round her chin and on her chest. Her bosom and hips . . . were bigger than a boy’s. . . . But she began to menstruate. And although her clitoris became large, the rest of her genitals developed like those of a woman.” The doctor told her “You can do everything a woman can but you will have no children” (Singh 29). Just at the age of fifteen, “. . . the leader of the troupe took her as his wife. He already had two hijda wives; but such things do not matter to them. Instead of shunning her as a rival, the wives . . . escorted her to their husband’s room.” Later on, the reader is informed that the other wives of the head of the hijra clan also made love to her often. Further, in order to survive and live her life, Bhagmati– the “plainest of hijdas” takes up sex work and surprisingly she has got “more patrons than anyone else in her troupe”(Singh 30).

Mr. Singh gets to meet Bhagmati in an awful state as she is attacked by an epileptic fit on the ridge road while returning to her quarters. On the deserted road, “Her eyes were half-open; a little froth and blood trickled down her mouth” (32). Noting a woman, the narrator stopped by and two cyclists joined him. They stand staring on her strange woman body having almost “non existent bosom”. The boys leave her hurriedly just after thrusting a twig in her mouth and making her smell the old leather thinking all this will help her in the fit. Mr. Singh is left alone to handle her, she signals him about having “chukkur” and requests him to take her to bus stand but she again falls unconscious in his car. The narrator unable to decide, where to take her, turns towards his apartment and takes her home. There, Bhagmati recovers after some time and tells the narrator that she lives in Lal Kuan. Mr. Singh knows that in Lal Kuan, there are hermaphrodites’ quarters, so his curiosity is aroused. Soon after, Mr. Singh indulges with her, not for the sake of it but for the sake of a new experience “to add to his knowledge” (39). Hereafter, in the novel, detail and depth is added to Bhagmati and Mr. Singh’s deep passionate relationship intertwined with the history of the city. With each alternative chapter named ‘Bhagmati’ the narrative develops so that Delhi and Bhagmati become synonymous. One can notice striking association of the city with Bhagmati, since both are subjected to use and abuse but still, both these maintain their charm. Interestingly, she becomes an important metaphor sustained throughout the novel which is emblematic of the very spirit of Delhi– casteless, creedless, genderless, exploited, maligned, shunned and still surviving through centuries.

It is worth noting that all type of genders existed freely in ancient India and the eunuchs enjoyed privileged positions as in the story, the reader meets many eunuch characters who are confidantes to the rulers and sometimes even entitled to take crucial decisions on their part. The writer has juxtaposed many such characters parallel to the protagonist Bhagmati, for example, Etabar Khan– a trusted guard of Sultan Aurangzeb, Javed Khan– a “khwajasara (eunuch)” in charge of the royal harem in the rule of Mohammed Nadir Shah and one another eunuch is also portrayed who performs the role of a messenger during reign of Sultan Nasiruddin Mohammed Shah. In contrast to it, the story of Bhagmati highlights the position of eunuchs in 1990s where

they are considered sexual outcastes, an anomaly and something to be feared of. A glance at the Table of Contents of the book reveals that the writer has devoted ten chapters to Bhagmati and the chapters are named directly after her. It is also important to note that only five other chapters are named after other historical figures or incidents namely “The Timurid”, “Aurangzeb Alamgir- Emperor of Hindustan”, “Nadir Shah” “Meer Taqi Meer” and “1857”. Rest of the five chapters in the novel just talk about various incidents and historical happenings that shaped Delhi. However, there is not even a single historical anecdote in the novel that does not have a eunuch, a gay or a queer sexual relationship. It seems as if the writer is reflecting the image of Bhagmati in the imperial society of India.

However, the strange paradox is that while reading the book, it is noted that despite many first person narratives, Bhagmati or any other queer character among a number of such minor characters never speaks. They are not found narrating their own story; rather on their behalf either Mr. Singh or other narrators explicate, qualifying them as insignificant “other”. On the other hand, the writer through the narrator in the novel talks at length about various topics like the role of ambassadors, Indian vs. foreigners’ behaviour patterns, Sikhism and old age. Khushwant Singh even elaborates on various types of hijras, “There are many kinds of hijdas as there are kinds of men and women. Some are almost entirely male, some almost entirely female. Others have the male and female mixed up in different proportions– it is difficult to tell which sex they have more in their makeup” (Singh 29). However, his complete silence over various important aspects of Bhagmati’s life such as her parents giving her away and never looking back, her marriage at the age of fifteen with the leader of the troupe, her sex work and her rootlessness, is symbolic of invisible hijra lives after the introduction and enforcement of anti-sodomy law by British rule in 1861. Furthermore, not letting Bhagmati speak her own story is also figurative of the absence of hijra voice and subjectivity.

Given that the writer does not comment upon such important happenings of Bhagmati’s life carries deep implications. It strongly conveys the fact that Indian community is not only androcentric and phallogocentric but also heterosexist and homophobic. Hence, for the parents, unambiguous sex of their child becomes a matter of shame, the father’s virility and the mother’s fertility comes in question. Consequently, the parents have to give away such children to save themselves from lifelong humiliation and shame. Further, the act of Bhagmati’s parents giving her away to a clan of hijras highlights how this special community continues its lineage without having any reproductive ability. In this regard Anuja Aggarwal in *Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India: Contributions to Indian Sociology* analyses the various ways of recruiting hijras to add new members to their communities. She elaborates that hijras adopt intersex children from their parents, sometimes, the parents themselves give such a child to the hijras (as in the case of Bhagmati), sometimes individuals themselves join the hijras, or in rare cases, hijras may claim an intersex child as their right.

Jennifer Ung Loh in her article *Narrating Identity: the Employment of Mythological and Literary Narratives in Identity Formation Among the Hijras of India*, explains what happens to children who willingly or unwillingly come to be a part of hijra kin. She clarifies that gurus who have many chelas under them adopt such persons. She further elaborates the hijra household, “The *guru-celā* relationship dictates certain behaviour: the *guru* provides a home, food, clothes, opportunities for work, and teaches them about membership of the household and wider community. In return, the *celā* brings in extra income, performs chores, and helps to look after their *guru*”. This relationship is based upon mutual sharing and inter-dependence. It “. . . allows *hijras* to form relationships of support and affection with one another, alongside providing security and protection from social violence, which many *hijras* experience due to the severance of ties with their natal families” (Loh 25). Moreover, shared practices, rituals, and performances unique to hijras lead to a sense of shared group identity and community membership. In context of the novel also, this practice is noted since Bhagmati lives in a hijra-household with other wives of the leader of the troupe.

Bhagmati continues to live with her husband and co-wives in Lal Kuan. She puts whatever she earns in the community kitty, in return, she has a roof over her head, and a meal whenever she wants it. When she is ill, they look after her. When she is arrested for soliciting, they furnish bail; when she is sentenced by the magistrate, they pay the fine. (Singh 30)

Thus, in the novel the relationship of guru (teacher) and chela (disciple) not only provides for family and social needs, but also for one's financial support. However, no initiation ceremony is described for Bhagmati and her name is also not christened as Dr. Piyush finds in his study on Indian hijra groups titled *Queering Indian Sociology: A Critical Engagement*. Another researcher Serena Nanda in her study on Indian hijrahood also finds similar small groups scattered in various parts of the country. The writer also finds that in order to become part of any such community, a guru must sponsor the person and a ‘dand’(fee) must be paid (Nanda 39). Thus, ‘guru-chela’ relationship showcased in the book is an authentic account since many such small communities actually exist.

However, despite hijra hyper-visibility in metropolitan cities, the eunuchs still remain forsaken and forbidden objects of society and any association with them becomes a point of insult and contempt. Hence, the narrator of the story who belongs to the elite circle of politicians, journalists, and ambassadors living in Delhi is also mocked at. For example, Budh Singh, the security guard of Mr. Singh's apartment keeps on repeating, “Take a woman, take a boy, but a hijda . . .” (Singh 12). He retorts quite often, “. . . everyone is talking about it. They say, take woman, take boy— okay! But a hijda! That's not nice” (Singh 6). In another incident also, Mr. Singh is mocked at for his queer interest in his circle of “coffee-house friends.” One of them while describing his own sex life remarks sarcastically “. . . I stick to my motto: when you find a woman fornicate, when you do not be celibate. No self-abuse, no boys, no hijdas.” This implies hitting the narrator below the belt; hence, uneducated and educated people alike criticize such

practices. Occasionally, the narrator too becomes an agent of discrimination under the pressure of societal norms so that he reacts crossly when Bhagmati requests him to take her to some hotel. The narrator chides her, “And be seen with you in public? You want me to cut off my own nose?” However, gradually, the narrator overcomes his conditioned response and realizes that hijras are human beings with desires. He develops true love and feelings for her and views in his mind “How did she come to mean so much to me?” Bhagmati also reciprocates his feelings although she serves many patrons.

The writer juxtaposes one more incident of contempt and humiliation towards hijras in the historical part of the story where Abdullah, a Hindu turned Muslim compares his agony to a hijra’s “who was [is] neither one thing nor another but could be misused by everyone” (55). In a similar context, Abdullah’s wife Ram Dulari curses one Muslim colleague of her husband and remarks, “Let your enemies be hijdas!” Thus, it is evident that the term hijra has been used in derogatory sense in the bygone times despite the fact that eunuchs occupied prominent positions and lived in perfect harmony with the community. Nevertheless, the queerness of the fact lies in the aspect of writer’s usage of word ‘hijda’ instead of the commonly used word ‘hijra’. There is a high probability that the writer has used this term because the word ‘hijda’ means ‘hijrat-zada’ in Urdu, which further means ‘exiled’. This may possibly refer to the abandoning of Bhagmati by her parents and her rootlessness. This may be the reason that Bhagmati is always on the move and she is never shown at home. Broadly, this may pertain to the exiled state of the whole hijra community.

Along with affirming many truths about hijra lives, the story also deflates many myths about hijras. Firstly, one discovers that ‘eunuchs’ just like common people desire pleasure and companionship, however, odd they may look from the perspective of ideal beauty. Where most of the men think that it’s “self- abuse” to be with boys or hijras, the narrator beams with desire for dusky Bhagmati and for him, “her mouth smells of fresh cloves and she speaks like her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Hindustan. Only when making love does she behave, as every woman should, like a lusty harlot” (Singh 2). Secondly, the idealization of heterosexual relationship is seriously challenged since both Mr. Singh and Bhagmati long for each other and feel for each other very deeply. Moreover, the writer affirms that transsexual prostitutes are even more in demand than women are. He says, “When men came to expend their lust on hijdas– it is surprising how many prefer them to women” (30). Thirdly, the common notion about hijras that they are non-sexual or asexual or do not have interest in sex is also blasted since Bhagmati readily offers herself. Further, she becomes angry when Mr. Singh loses interest in being physically passionate due to his increasing age. Fourthly, the novel also explodes the essentialist myth of fixed essence since Bhagmati, has adopted hijra ways and the essence of hijrahood was not present in her until she acquired it through learning. She was “taught” to sing, clap her hands and dance in the manner of hijras and this usage of word ‘taught’ challenges the notion of essentialism, which assumes that the particular behaviour accorded to one’s gender, is essentially

present at the time of birth. Finally, the novel also bursts the created and reaffirmed myth that only the heterosexist procreative sex is healthy, natural and a good pleasure.

The fictional work fairly highlights the conservative nature of Indian society where traditional family values, social circle and social expectations from an individual matter more than individual emancipation. Furthermore, concepts such as 'shame' and 'honour' play an important role in all contexts. Social obligation is so supreme that being a male or female in the strictest sense becomes a mandate. Mr. Singh cannot dare to take Bhagmati for an outing without transforming her into a modern version which makes her look more plain and presentable in men's attire:

There is no one I'd like to be with more than Bhagmati. But not with her red and blue sari and her head looking like a nest of butterflies. I've bought her a pair of stretch-pants and an open collared shirt . . . Now it's a different Bhagmati: a sprightly little gamine in a canvas kepi . . . Very chic! No one can tell whether she is a hijda or a boy who looks like a girl. (Singh 47)

Khushwant Singh, known for his sarcasm and straight telling, metes out the same treatment to the subject of the book. He poses a strange retort to a general query about why most of the hijras dress as women and not as men. The narrator explains that male preference is so deep rooted in Indian society that even hijras have to dress like women because "it being a man's world every deviation from accepted standards of masculinity is regarded as unmanly. Women are more generous" (Singh 29). Hence, Khushwant Singh indirectly mocks at the male-dominating culture of India and hints at the docile nature of women thus highlighting that power structures and hegemonic position of men thrives on the silence and humility of women and not on any supernatural or God-ordained design.

Sherry B. Ortner in her essay *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* explores the assumption behind the notion that women are closer to nature and men are closer to culture. The nature versus culture theory assumes that woman's body and its functions, are "more involved . . . with species life" while men do not have the same functions so this fact "frees them completely to take up the projects of culture" (Gould 18). Interestingly, the novel challenges both the categories 'nature' as well as 'culture' because; Bhagmati's character inverts the very rationale behind the two. Khushwant Singh's heroine is a flat bosomed woman, thus, having lesser irrelevant body part not necessary to personal health as stated by Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Bhagmati can do everything like a woman except producing children thus her portrayal challenges the category of women as well as the category of most of the transsexuals as she even menstruates like women. Since she (and all transsexuals) cannot produce children, this fact does not let her become the "prey of the species" (18). Hence, she is free from the shackles of "biological determinism" (22) but not actually free in the true sense since she menstruates. Thus, she comes to lie in an intermediate position which is problematic as she can claim neither the position of a man and nor the position of a woman. There are no absolutes rather

intermediates lying somewhere in between nature and culture scale producing and occupying an intermediate position between culture and nature. In other words, Bhagmati in spite of using feminized vocabulary and expressions is no absolute neither in sex nor in gender. Her character is portrayed in such a way that Bhagmati (nature) – a non-normative woman neither accepts her own devaluation nor take cultures' point of view. She rather exercises her agency very often that is clear from Bhagmati's freedom of movement, her coming to Mr. Singh whenever she pleases and her bold act of protecting the narrator during anti-sikh riots in the city after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her two sikh security guards. Thus, it seems that the author intends to write the saga of a eunuch, where Bhagmati, being representative of 'nature' quite often becomes an epitome of 'culture' thus blurring the distinction between a man and woman qualifying her 'in-between'.

To sum up, it can be safely concluded that the writer has taken a bold stance by developing a non-normative character fully while keeping the normative character anonymous and by exploring the queer side of their relationship. Even bolder is the author's appeal of bringing denaturalized non-procreative sexuality to centre stage. Additionally, the writer presenting a hijra- as an epitome of love and lust qualifies this text as queer in its truest normative sense of the world because of the reason that it contorts the age-old moralization of sex, sexuality and pleasure.

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