

Exploring the Multifaceted Realities of Delhi in Tabish Khair's *An Angel in Pyjamas*

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Abstract

The article analyses the multiple and contrasting realities present in the city of Delhi as depicted in Tabish Khair's novel *An Angel in Pyjamas*. In the novel, the city serves as a canvas for a profound exploration of human experiences. Set against the backdrop of contrasting landscapes of a fictional small town Phansa and the metropolis of Delhi, Khair delves into the complexities of urban life. This article explores the novel's multilinear narrative and geographical settings, which provide readers with an intimate understanding of the characters' mindsets, dreams, and aspirations, shaped by the unique essence of their places of origin. The two central characters in the novel, young journalist Yunus and naïve migrant Sukhbir, exemplify the various facets of Delhi's allure and complexity. This article explores the allure and contradictions of the city, where hope and despair coexist, through the lens of the characters' dreams, despair, and illusions.

Keywords: Tabish Khair, Delhi; magic realism; urban experience; marginalised lives

Ranjana Sengupta suggests that Delhi's multifaceted nature defies analysis from any single perspective. She says that it "is a city that is simultaneously many things to many people" (19). Stories of the inhabitants reflecting diverse experiences, fortunes, and hardships offered by city life add richness to Delhi's narratives. As Adrija Roychowdhury mentions in her book on the names of different localities of the city, "it is through the people of Delhi, their lived experience and their little anecdotes, which clearly did not make their way to the history textbooks, that I tell the story of the names in Delhi" (xxxvii). The city is not just a land of dreams, growth and prosperity. The stories of the marginalised and outsiders—who come to the city in search of a better life—reflect how Delhi holds "a strange disquieting reality" (Dasgupta 439). For them, "the city is a contradiction" (Chaturvedi xi) where hope and despair coexist, heightening their vulnerability.

An Angel in Pyjamas, published in 1996 by Tabish Khair is his first novel. It makes use of magic realism to confront the inexplicable life and circumstances that the city of Delhi offers. Ranging from the hope that the city offers to outsiders, to the distressing living conditions of

the marginalised, to the uncanny presence of the long-dead historical figure, Ghalib roaming in the city, the novel packs a dense narration that offers multiple realities of the city. Ranjana Sidhanta Ash in the review of the novel has described it as “a kind of *comédie noire*” having “a mixture of broad humour, bordering on parody, intermixed with fantasy which may be described as part allegory and part magical realism” (Mahjoub 77). It follows multilinear narration and tells the stories of Yunus, a young journalist in Phansa; Chatterji, the English teacher; Sukhbir, a naïve migrant working in Delhi; and the narrator who is a news correspondent in Delhi. The story is set in two places, a fictional small town Phansa and Delhi.

Phansa is representative of average small town where the tight-knit population fosters a familiarity and nearly everyone is acquainted with each other. The residents are characterised by their simplicity, naivety, and devoutness, and they have strict moral norms that govern their lives. For Phansa inhabitants and neighbouring villagers, any city, especially Delhi embodies vileness and immorality. It acts as a realm of perdition, where inhabitants disregard religious and moral principles. In their eyes, the city is a tempting force that leads individuals down to an irreligious and immoral path. Nevertheless, paradoxically, there exists an undeniable allure for the city, as it presents a hope for a better life that draws people towards it.

The centrality of the place in the novel can be seen through the prominence given to the locations. Every chapter is titled either “Phansa” or “Dilli/Delhi”. The locations in the narrative serve as a crucial backdrop that enables readers to delve into the intricate psyche of the characters. The geographical settings act as a lens through which the readers can comprehend the characters' mindsets, decipher their dreams, and understand their aspirations and inhibitions based on the unique essence of the places they hail from.

Understanding the Ambiguity Towards the City Life

The novel opens with a definition of the word ‘city’ according to Yusuf’s father, Mian Firoz Shaikh, who is an orthodox religious man from a village. For him, the city is “a place where graduates imbibed divinely-prohibited spirits and postgraduates took drugs; where men wore ludicrous shorts and—what was worse—women wore trousers” (7). From a villager’s perspective who considers Phansa a small city—in reality, it is simply “an overgrown village” (7)—is a corruptible urban place. He agrees to send his younger son to study in Phansa only after Yusuf’s assurance that it “is not like other cities. Not like Patna. Not like Delhi at all. It is a traditional, god-fearing place—I should know, I have been there six years now” (9).

In the first chapter, the narrator paints a vivid picture of Phansa by juxtaposing it with notable locations such as Patna and Delhi. More than the geographical location this description gives the socio-cultural positioning of the place with respect to major cities. The reference to Delhi carries a subtle element of allure associated with it. “He was travelling...towards the historical city of Phansa, a dozen kilometres from the brambly and desolate Jamalpur Bird Sanctuary, exactly a hundred kilometres from Patna and a thousand kilometres from, ah, Delhi” (7). Despite the character's immediate destination being Phansa, there is a palpable sense of longing conveyed through the stylistic use of “ah, Delhi”.

A similar sentiment emerges later in the novel, when Sukhbir's brothers, who are natives of a small Punjab village, discuss Delhi. "His brothers commenced talking, rather too loudly, about *the* city—Delhi—oh, the glories of Dilli, the city of Capital and concubines, the oasis of opportunities, the metropolis of memsahibs and Maruti" (260). The employment of italics for emphasis and the emotive interjections 'ah' and 'oh' preceding the city's name indicate a depth of emotion associated with Delhi. These emotions hint at a narrative steeped in dreams and illusions, portraying the city as a realm filled with promises of a better life, moral opulence, and material prosperity.

The residents of Phansa, on one level, proudly uphold the cityhood status of their locale and reject its characterization as merely a big village. On another level, they echo the views of individuals like Mian Firoz Shaikh, who consider cities as morally corrupt and reprehensible. In their view, there exists a paradoxical duality where they find affinity towards city life yet harbour an inherent scepticism and disdain towards it.

Within the confines of Phansa, there exists a shared belief that cities, particularly ones like Delhi, are breeding grounds for immorality and societal decay. The mere sighting of a young girl cycling in jeans or the possibility of a romantic relationship between individuals of different religious backgrounds elicits strong condemnation, with such activities being deemed immoral and sinful. This moral conservatism is reflective of a prevailing perception that these behaviours are characteristic of cities like Delhi but are considered unsuitable for the sanctity of their own city, Phansa.

When gossip circulates in their city regarding Chatterji's relationship with Farida, a young Muslim girl, the inhabitants staunchly condemn it. They take it upon themselves to rectify what they perceive as a misguided situation, asserting that a relationship between a Muslim girl and a Hindu boy is deemed not only criminal but also sinful, even if it were to culminate in marriage. The prevailing sentiment is underscored by the belief that their city, unlike Delhi, adheres to certain norms. In response to these perceived transgressions, a delegation assumes the responsibility of meeting with Chatterji to dissuade him from continuing his relationship and guide him back onto what they consider the correct path. When Chatterji refutes their allegations, they come to the conclusion that since he is used to living in big cities, he cannot understand the gravity of the situation. They associate Chatterji's liberal and progressive attitudes with the perceived lack of norms characteristic of larger cities.

Even Mian Firoz Shaikh, a vocal critic of urban life, exhibits a noticeable allure for the city. When his elder son, Yunus gets a marriage proposal with an enticing offer of a job and a house in Delhi, he promptly accepts it. Yunus's father takes immense pride in the notion that Yunus will be acquiring a residence in the upscale locality of South Delhi. "Though he had been to Delhi just once in his lifetime, he knew that the South Delhi localities were better and most fashionable ones. Such possessions could make him overlook his early objections to big cities. He looked forward to telling his fellow villagers: "Yunus has a flat in South Dilli. In Baby Nagar"" (297). Life in Delhi, especially for someone belonging to the village or a small town, is seen as a status symbol. The golden opportunity of settling in Delhi through marriage is warmly embraced by Yunus and his family. However, Delhi and its residents are still perceived as shameless and immoral. In the wedding, the baraatis consist solely of men because, in their respectable and decent communities, unlike the "shameless places like Delhi and Calcutta" (302), women do not participate in wedding processions. For the people, there appears to be an acceptance of the contradictory sentiments linked with Delhi.

Dreams and Illusions of Delhi

Rana Dasgupta in his seminal work *Capital: The Eruption of Delhi* has identified “the core of the city’s soul” as “something dark and fatal” (206). He feels the allure that city holds is “nauseating and yet secretly delicious” that ultimately corrupts people (206). People from small towns and villages swarm towards the city in search of a better life. As in the case of Sukhbir, a poor farmer with a large family and limited land, Delhi presents a better prospect of living and finding a means to survive. He feels, “What sort of future could he aspire to in this village, tilling a strip of land that would not even feed one family properly?” (261). According to his circumstances, moving to Delhi will be a “road to a better life” (261). But the reality that he experiences in Delhi makes him understand that his dreams are mere illusions. Within the city, there exist two distinct worlds: one for the affluent and another for the impoverished. The narrator describes the two versions of the city using the metaphor of two winters. “There are, suited-booted reader, two different winters in Delhi: the winter of the Press Club and light woollens and the winter of Sukhbir and the open pavements. Two different winters descend every year at the same time on this city of many layers of history. And those who read by the fire of one winter are unable to see those who shudder in the cold of the other winter” (257).

Sukhbir's firsthand encounters with the harsh realities of existence find resonance with the sentiments expressed by Balram, the protagonist in Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008). In his Booker prize-winning novel, Adiga presents the dark reality of the city, where stark inequalities lurk behind the urban glamour. He labels villages as dark places where resources are scarce. Delhi becomes a beacon of hope and light where poor villagers migrate in pursuit of employment prospects. However, upon their arrival in the city, these migrants soon realize that the brightness they envisioned is dimmed by the shadows of poverty and exploitation. When Balram looks at the homeless migrant workers sleeping on the roadside he thinks, “These poor bastards had come from the Darkness to Delhi to find some light – but they were still in the darkness” (132).

When Sukhbir arrives in Delhi he finds that there is no one to help him procure a job or to even find a shelter to sleep. Due to a lack of resources and connections in the city, he is easily exploited by the police and ultimately killed in the end. Like so many homeless migrant labourers he is expendable, and therefore his death is seen as incidental which affects no one.

The narrator labels Delhi as “asura city” (261), a term passed down from Sukhbir's grandmother's stories. The fantastical reference to the city metaphorically embodies the essence of a demonic place that challenges his survival. The novel employs magical realism through the narrative of the ‘Crown of Destiny’ of the ‘devas’, an artifact Sukhbir wields to potentially conquer the ‘asura city’. However, the supernatural power of the ‘Crown of Destiny’ proves inconsequential in the face of pervasive poverty, corruption, unemployment, and homelessness, highlighting the harsh realities that supersede mere fantastical interventions.

Both Yunus and Sukhbir move from their respective hometowns and villages to the city in pursuit of new beginnings. Their success hinges significantly on their support systems, which encompass a network of individuals, resources, and amenities crucial for their endeavours. While Yunus benefits from economic assistance and connections provided by family

members and friends, Sukhbir lacks such a support network in his life. In addition to this, the city remains inhospitable to the poor and marginalised sections of the society.

Yunus's aunt-in-law, Rukhsana, extends Yunus a job offer and provides a house to facilitate a comfortable start to his married life in Delhi. With Rukhsana already established and connected in the city, her extensive network of relations and contacts serves as a valuable support system for him. To convince her brother about her niece's marriage to Yunus, Rukhsana outlines her plans, stating "I plan to get him a job in Delhi. He writes in Urdu. I am sure Shahid Parvez of *Buland Awaaz* will take him on as an assistant editor or something. And then we will see what else turns up: I have some contacts in the *Sunday Mail* and *The Hindustan Times*. I am sure Yunus would grab the opportunity to move on to the national arena...And then we have your flat in Delhi" (295).

Both Yunus and Sukhbir find themselves in Delhi not because of their own aspirations, but rather due to their respective circumstances. Yunus's path to the city is paved with convenience as he finds everything readily available through his marriage to Farida—a beautiful bride, a house, and a job. In stark contrast, Sukhbir's journey is fraught with hardships and trials. With no support system to guide him, Sukhbir's move to Delhi is not a choice but a necessity forced upon him by circumstances.

Sukhbir used to live in his village with his grandmother, two brothers, and their wives. His family faced struggles as their small plot of land couldn't sustain them. To lessen the load on their family, Sukhbir's brothers conspire and send him to an acquaintance in Delhi who might offer him work and lodging. However, the acquaintance who is also a fellow villager who works as a bellboy in a hotel has his own dire circumstances and is unable to assist Sukhbir. Without any help or support Sukhbir faces uncertainty and hardship on a daily basis. He sleeps on pavements and occasionally secures employment as an unskilled labourer.

Yunus effortlessly finds his place in Delhi, accompanied by his father-in-law who navigates the city with ease. Through Rukhsana's connection Yunus secures a job without any effort. His transition to Delhi is marked by convenience rather than active pursuit, as he effortlessly integrates into his new surroundings with all the necessary resources at his disposal. In stark contrast, Sukhbir encounters the antithesis of Yunus's experience. For him, Delhi remains a daunting and impenetrable landscape.

Khair in his works "inexorably alters his readers' perception of the world, but above all, one's perception of one's own borders" (Gámez-Fernández xiii). He compels the readers to reconsider their position from where they are consuming his writings. When he talks about how the same winter in Delhi is different for the different classes, he addresses an intended audience—the "suited-booted reader" (257) who has certain socio-cultural baggage—and compels them to look beyond their position. Within his portrayal of Delhi in the novel, Khair crafts a multifaceted landscape, inviting readers to peel back its layers and explore its depths through the lens of various characters.

The perception of Delhi amongst the people of towns and villages is dual in nature, akin to the two faces of Janus. On one hand, it symbolises hope and opportunity, offering the promise of a better life with increased resources and chances for advancement. Conversely, it is also seen as a place of corruption and vice, where societal ills flourish. Despite its ominous reputation, Delhi remains captivating, holding the allure of opportunity. For the city dwellers,

it again has to offer two different worlds, one is characterised by the privileges and opportunities, the other by the discriminations and challenges.

The writer's own background adds a layer of authenticity to his fictional portrayal of Delhi. Hailing from Gaya, a small town in Bihar, and having experienced life in Delhi firsthand, Khair infuses his narrative with autobiographical elements (John; Khair TBLM). This experiential understanding of the city lends depth to his observations and judgments, providing readers with a rich and nuanced depiction of urban life from both outsider and insider perspectives.

Om Prakash Dwivedi calls Khair's usage of magic realism in the novel as a spoof where he offers a "tongue-in-cheek take on [it, like] Salman Rushdie" (105). Though at times, the use of magic realism whether through the figure of Ghalib or Sukhbir's 'Crown of Destiny' to confront the inexplicable, becomes incoherent with the overarching narrative of the novel. While they provide allegorical commentary over the ills of the society, they fail "to move or illuminate Delhi's crisis" (Mahjoub 77). In the novel, Khair not only presents a vivid exploration of the contrasting landscapes of Phansa and Delhi but also delves into the intricacies of human experience within these settings. He masterfully navigates the intricate tapestry both external social landscape as well as internal psyche of characters thus offering readers a profound exploration of dreams, despair, illusions and reality.

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