

Inclusion and Representation of Transgender People in Literary Space and Society: An Analysis with Reference to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

A person is identified by gender as male or female in society and correspondingly carries on their social roles and responsibilities. For centuries, society has assigned different roles making the biological distinction of gender. This difference has developed a concept that men and women have separate roles to play and thus refrain from equality. Correspondingly, this categorization is a setback for those between the two male or female gender. Transgender people or hijras or eunuchs, known by many names, have been an intrinsic part of society and have recorded their presence in the world's history. With time, transgender peoples' positions have differed and, eventually, their importance in society. From time to time, authors in literary sphere have unveiled the subaltern status of the transgender community and depicted the pathetic conditions and discrimination they have faced in every sphere of life. In her recent work, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy has portrayed the immense potential of a transgender person. She includes in the second novel, which is an active member of the society and, as a mouthpiece, depicts the lives of the hijra community and their position in the social sphere. For ages, the community has been subjected to mockery and looked down upon for their distinctive identity and presented as 'other'. This paper explores transgender people's prominence in different periods and their inclusion in the literary sphere and society.

Keywords: Transgender, Hijra, Social Exclusion, Mainstream Society,

Introduction

Arundhati Roy claims her triumphant return novel with *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in the fictional world after twenty years. The recipient of The Booker prize winner comes up with a fiction densely populated with characters that tell the tale of contemporary India. In the second novel, she widens up her geographical area and has highlighted different recent social and political issues the country has undergone. The book chronicles India's past twenty years and the contemporary history retold by a transgender person or hijra. Roy has created the hijra as a protagonist and thus gives voice to the voiceless, of which she is a master. She has not limited the portrayal of Anjum as a subaltern, and she distresses but has effectively made the character speak against the injustices and has established that the possibility of a marginalized can move forward with the progress of time. Anjum is a Hijra from Shahjahanabad, Delhi. Her birth disrupts the parents after knowing the truth about the baby and shatters the expectation of a boy child of the couple parents. Through the multiple series of reactions of the mother, the author explains the deep shock she has gone across. Anjum leaves her parents' house in adolescence and joins the community of hijra, and settles down in 'Khwabgah' in search of peace, acceptance, and identity as a woman. There she learned the specifics of the hijra lifestyle and gradually recognized the position of a hijra in the outside world.

Transgender people demonstrate themselves to be of the opposite gender to their biological sex, and hence they differ from typical stereotypes of men and women. Known by many names

as shiv-Shaktis, Sakhi, jogappas, jogtas, Aradhis hijras, or kinnars have been a part of society since the evolution of humankind. The novel counts their status in the Mughal period. One of the hijras in the story, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, shares that they were a trusted community of Shahenshahs and were provided with facilities to live in the haveli built by the powerful emperors. Anjum shows the inclination of transwomen and moves to the House of Dreams to fulfil her dreams and to express herself as a woman.

Eunuchs in Indian Mythology and Epics

In Indian mythology, one form of lord Shiva is Ardhnareeshwara, a hermaphrodite. In this form, the deity looks half man and half woman. The belief in the presence of the divine with attributes of man and woman in mythology indicates that people have accepted them as they are and worshipped their divine form with whole devotion. The presence of the third gender in Valmiki *Ramayana*, and it is trusted that the closeness to the divine lord Rama has filled them with the power to confer blessings, is well explained in the holy book. It mentions that when Rama went for fourteen years of exile, Ajodhya's heartbroken men and women came to the city's border to see him. Lord Rama requested all men and women to go back home, but the third gender waited there for fourteen years. The gesture of devotion moved lord Rama, and subsequently, they got the power to bless other humans. The character Shikhandi, a trans man in *Mahabharata*, plays a vital role in saving Arjuna. Lord Krishna makes Shikhandi stand in the forefront of Arjuna and helps him attack Bhishma during the war, knowing Bhishma will not kill a woman.

Eunuchs in Islamic History and in Mughal Establishment

A British traveller Eldon Rutter visited Prophet's tomb in Medina in 1925 and described in his travelogue about eunuchs around the tomb guarding and lighting the lamp to honour the God, showing the sacred relationship they shared, mentions Shaun Marmon in the book *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society*. Rutter explained the presence of eunuchs or transgender people in Mecca and Medina. In the *haram*, he describes the appointment of eunuchs on the Mataf. He further explained that this was to handle women in improper attire or an unclean state, and eunuchs were permitted to expel them while maintaining decorum because they were not men in the true sense. Carsten Neibuhr, a German traveller during the eighteenth century,

explains that eunuchs were trusted entity hence were given to guard the treasure stored in the mosque. Neibuhr analyses that this trust was due to the eunuchs having no family. Henceforth they were beyond any temptation for wealth and had no aim to save for their descendants. Explanations given by the researchers have one thing in common: the claim that eunuchs or transgender people place in the Prophet's Mosque. They were the "holy souls trapped in the wrong bodies"(Roy 53) therefore, were nearby to the Prophet.

Hijra is an Urdu term that indicates the hijra culture and society developed during the Mughal reign in India. During the Mughal empire, the Eunuchs or hijras or *Khwajasaras* (a Persian term) were appointed servants, slaves, and administrative officers. In addition, they were political advisors, trusted confidants, caretakers of the harem, kings and queens, princesses and princes. Eunuchs, despite their diverse gender, occupied a significant position in the Mughal period and were an essential part of the harem, including in the public sphere. Gulbadan Begum, Babur's daughter, has recorded *Kwajasara* Ambar's bravery in guarding royal women who had to take shelter in Bala Hissar fort. Dr. C. K. Gariyali et al. mention the positions of hijras or Kwajasaras in the royal courts "Etmad Khan held the rank of 3,000 under

Akbar's *Mansabdari* system. Firuz Khan held an equal rank during the reign of Akbar's grandson, Shahjahan" (Gariyali and Rajkumar 31).

Eunuchs during Colonial Period and in Post-Colonial India

With the mark of the British period position of eunuchs declines and reduces to a state of total marginalization. Jessica Hinchy, in her book *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, writes that during British rule, hijras were considered 'ungovernable' and dangerous for the government. Henceforth, in 1871 the government, intending to destroy the community, passed a law to take them as criminals. To the British officials, they produced filth and contagious diseases. The influential figures of the Mughal Sultanate were diminished to a 'criminal tribe' during the colonial rule under the 1871 law[1]. The eunuchs faced restrictions in wearing female clothes and ornaments publicly and were prisoned if they did not adhere to the rules imposed upon them by the officials. Dr Hinchey's points out the economic crisis the hijras faced with the ban on dance performances during the colonial period. The registration of eunuchs under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), 1871, kept the community under continuous British officials' surveillance. Their movements were restricted—these provisions aimed at the moral weakening of the hijra community, which would gradually become extinct. The Britishers brought different attitudes towards them that narrowed their status and consequently secluded them from mainstream society. Hinchy points out the British mindset of the community.

The British frequently described Hijras as 'filth' or disease spreading through Indian society. This discourse of exponential spread heightened the official anxiety about Hijras. A language of dirt, contamination and contagion was scattered through colonial accounts because the British viewed Hijras as a source of disorder, as a 'matter out of place', which threatened the colonial moral, social and political order (Hinchy 78).

The British mindset existed after independence. Henceforth the status of the hijra community remained as it was in the colonial period in India. They suffered abuse and humiliation in their daily life. Hijras begging in traffic and on railways was a familiar scene.

Representation of Transgenders in Literary Space

The journey of a hijra to become a woman or a man is difficult. In the book *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, the author shares her longingness "A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself...I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered as a man" (Revathi 15). A Revathi, in her autobiography, shares a series of unease about being born in the wrong body and her emotional journey to escape from the inhuman treatment received by her family and society. The village-born girl decided to leave her home and take shelter with the hijra community in Delhi. In the book *Nor Man Nor Woman*, Sarena Nanda mentions hijras show affinity to be a woman though the social meaning of a Hijra is of neither men nor women. Devdutt Patnaik, an Indian author in the book *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Do Not Tell You*, writes about the consistent mention of queerness in Hindu mythology. The book mentions many accounts of men becoming women and vice vis. And so much so that men have children without women, similarly to women without men.

Manobi Banopadhyay, in her autobiography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, talks about a cruel joke played on her by fortune. She is honest in her narration of transformation from a boy named Somnath to a woman named Manobi. Kalki Subramaniam is another in a series of prominent transgender personalities who relentlessly fought for equality and to establish social rights and justice. She is a transgender activist who writes about a moving journey of transgender lives in *We Are Not the Others*. Kalki is the founder of the Sahodari Foundation,

which works to empower transgender people. She wants them to be free from all humiliations, celebrated by "clapped for herself" (Subramaniam 27) with an urge to have an optimistic stance for the community and inclusion in the society who are still destined to face humiliation and oppression. The fixed image of a transgender person or hijra, taking their alms out in traffic signals and begging, or seen in *Badhai* ceremony in marriages and of a newborn or playing a negative role in the lives of people has been presented by media which familiar person is easily influenced of, definitely, tells media's power. The Indian literary canon has represented transgender people through the stories of mythology or in through specific characters in their work. Khuswant Singh's novel *Delhi* the character Bhagmati is transgender, and the novelist has depicted the character as rejected, misused and mercilessly handled by common people as an object. The life of Bhagmati is narrated keeping at the backdrop of the prosperous six hundred years history of Delhi from the Mughals to the 1984 Sikh pogrom. The author's artistic sensibility is arrested in equating Delhi with the character Bhagmati who is also damaged, ruined and shredded with time but again rebuilt with new hope and energy to maintain the glory. Devdutt Pattanaik, in the book *The Pregnant King*, sets the story in a mythological landscape, and the characters are not in the binary frame of gender wherein a king becomes pregnant by a drink mistakenly consumed. Later, he loses his identity, whether to act as father or mother.

Pattanaik, in the book, focuses on social categorisation in men's and women's roles. Mahesh Dattani, the best among the Indian playwrights, wrote a full-length play *Seven Steps around the Fire* on transgender people and introduced the hijra community first time in theatre. It mentions the social exclusion of Hijras in the Indian social sphere. Dattani comes with the fact that these neglected lots have yearned for acceptance in society which is suppressed by the powerful and influential social system. Subbu Sharma's marriage to Kamala, a eunuch, is Dattani's intention to uplift the rejected lot. However, Sharma's father's refusal to accept the marriage indicates social unacceptance of the relationship. Champa and Anarkali, the two eunuch community members, were trapped behind bars, accused of Killing Kamala. The actual accused was set free, and the innocent duo, fearing more suffering, could not bring the truth to light. Arundhati Roy creates Anjum in the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* to showcase their longing for inclusion in mainstream society, and if, given the opportunity, they can create history. Roy establishes that Anjum' is no more a muted voice now and can give cover to the downtrodden, which Anjum does by building a Jannat guest house in the graveyard, a shelter for Delhi's marginalised. Anjum confronts Nimmo's faith that hijras are an experiment of God and are incapacitated of happiness.

Landmark Step to Inclusion in Social Sphere

The Supreme Court of India paid heed to their long struggle and, under the bench of K.S. Radhakrishnan and A.K. Sikri, on 25th of April, 2014, passed the judgement to recognise transgender people as 'Third Gender'. The honourable court provided the community with fundamental rights like standard genders and included them in mainstream society. The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill of 2015 ensured their welfare and collective development, restoring their self-esteem and providing them with legal freedom. In the landmark Judgment of National Legal Service Authority v Union of India, the Supreme Court of India recognised that transgender as the third gender was a step towards the end of social discrimination. To safeguard their rights, Transgender Protection Bill was passed in 2019 by the Indian Parliament. The reassigned sex after surgery is now preserved under the constitutional right to be identified as a male or female, thus securing legal protection in all spheres. The recognition of the Third Gender after a long struggle has facilitated them with other medical facilities, reservations in educational institutions, and jobs in various fields.

Suggestion

1. The landmark NALSA judgement to bring optimum change in attitude of people in the society for the community.
2. More research is to be done on the psychological issues of transgenders.
3. Timely evaluation of welfare schemes for the community is to be monitored.
4. Besides government initiatives various social organisations should include transgender people in various social activities to end discrimination and accept them as normal humans.
5. Literature based on Transgender should be included in high school and college curriculum.

Conclusion

The paper recalls history of transgender to establish the fact that the humane society is not only for men and women, but transgender is inseparable constituent of the society. Keeping transgender untouchable in the society is a great offense. They are valuable human resource and honorable. Various reforms with legal protections have increased their acceptability in the society as well as in political and commercial world. Old myths still restrict their freedom in many communities which can be removed provided it is taught from school level to treat them at par with men and women besides they get equal space to contribute to religious activities.

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