

Giving Voice to the Voiceless: Analysing the Transgender Characters in Select Indian English Novels

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Abstract:

The presence of third-gender or gender ambiguities have been a part and parcel of Indian society. With each passing yuga, the presence changed its form but has openly accepted the different variants of genders. But in the present times, the third-gendered people face problems of all sorts including social-exclusion, harassment, less or no familial and political support, etc. Authors time and again have worked on uplifting the status of transgenders in India by depicting the harrowing conditions and tragic lifestyle they uptake because of social repercussions. One such attempt has been made by Khushwant Singh who is a pioneer in showing the realities of different strata in India. Similarly, Arundhati Roy, pioneer in modern novel writing has brought up to life, the problems of Indian transgenders and the only profession they are allowed – prostitution or begging. In this paper, the analysis of various transgendered characters has been done to show their status in Indian society from old age, Mughal period and the present times.

Keywords: Ambiguities, Gender, social-exclusion, harassment, realities

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Transgender is an umbrella term for anyone who does not conform to the pre-decided heterogenous roles in the society that of the male and the female. "Transgender is the state of one's "gender identity" not matching one's "assigned sex". (Golden Kisha 2013) (Dasari, Reddy 2018) People who have ambiguous ideas of self and gender would fall under the category of transgenders. Not feeling yourself in your own body is the basic tragedy of a transgender person. "Those who fail to approximate the norms are condemned to a death within

life." (Butler, 1991:2)

Transgender might have become a common term for people nowadays, but it is yet not too commonly accepted by the people of

Indian society. For transgenders living a "normal" life without troubles, harassment or absconding abuses from people in Indian society; is still not acceptable for Indians. Because of the set norms of the society, transgenders are afraid to live openly and be a part of regular society as they know the Indian society will always consider it as a taboo. Although our constitution talks about equal rights for every citizen but there does not seem to be enough of equality for the transgenders. Aren't they human beings? Do not they too deserve to be treated equally?

Most of the Hindu- Political groups oppose LGBTQ community and protest it by saying that it is against our religious norms. Since ages it is seen by the people that, the Hindu temples have erotic sculptures and carvings upon it, which also depicts

homoerotic and trans-erotic poses too. Talking about the sacred scriptures like *Mahabharata*, King Drupada raises his daughter Shikhandini as a man and even gets him married, while his wife gets to know about the real self of Shikhandini, Yaksha intervenes in between and give the power to Shikhandini to use his manhood for a night and perform his duties of being a husband. Also, Arjun too had to disguise as a woman. However, in *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Mohini- the female incarnation of Lord Vishnu tells Brahma that if any man will refuse to make love to a woman in her fertile period will be a eunuch. Thus, Arjun is deprived of his manhood after he rejects the sexual and erotic attentions of the nymph Urvashi and he must live as Brihanalla in King Virata's court for a year.

"Hijras" were once a revered and accepted group in Indian culture. The Vedas, ancient, Hindu texts, include eunuchs and characters with both male and female characteristics. They were believed to bring luck and provide special fertility power . . . For centuries; they have performed badhai, or blessings at weddings and births." (DelliSwararaos 2016)

"There were historical evidence of recognition of "third-sex" or persons not confirm to male or female gender in near the beginning writings of ancient India. The concept of "tritiyrakriti" or "napumsaka" had been an integral part of the Hindu mythology, folklore, epic and early Vedic and Puranic literature." (Michelraj 2015)

Infact time to time, the Indian Writers too have taken a step towards it and have raised their voices against the inequality which the queer particularly the transgender community are suffering from. *Dancing with the Eunuch* by

Kamala Das is a poem which depicts the queer sentiments of the transgenders and their twisted sense of emotions. Similarly, the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* by Mahesh Duttani is another classic example of the atrocities faced by the transgendered community in Indian society and the sheer blocked mindset of the people who are unforgivingly cruel to not to accept the third gender as a part of their own culture as since many religious and cultural texts show the appearance of the third gender people. More so, the idea of a Hijra being a part of the community is still accepted as long as they happen to live in the ghettos at the peripheries of the society, them having a relationship with the so-called "straight" people is absolutely out of context.

This paper will quest for the lost identity of the transgender, usually lost in Indian society and will try to give a voice to it. This paper will try to voice the perceptions, feelings and emotions of the underprivileged and marginalized transgenders who are never allowed to live their life freely or in a way they want to live it. By talking about the issues dealt in the novels, this paper will take a stand on the side of transgenders by bringing out the unsparing irony of the caste, class, religion, masculinity and the queer subculture in India. Why gays, transgender, lesbians; all these people are treated inhumanly and are not considered to be the part of the society in India? Why they are deprived of living a life full of love and happiness? Why they are not having equal rights as an Indian citizen? Why they must hide their real sexual identity?

Arundhati Roy, who won the booker prize for her first fiction novel *God of Small Things*, didn't happen to write any other fiction until twenty years after when she produced *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* wherein she takes up the queer theme and gives the duty of narration to Anjum who is a transgender. The story discusses the life through Anjum's perception, the issues faced by her and dwells in the theme of re-

incarnation to make the novel yet more grand. Her take on the theme of transgenderism is an attempt to throw light on their conditions and atrocities based by this minority group. By the character of Anjum, Roy also tends to focus on the divided conditions of India, making it as a metaphor for it.

Khushwant Singh is a pioneer writer of Indian English Literature who has been dwelling on themes that are communal in nature. Being a lawyer, journalist and a writer; Singh brings out the war themes in a very practical and unbiased manner. His affection with words is realistic and so is the depiction of the themes. His books like *Train to Pakistan*, *Delhi, Delhi: A Novel* have claimed immense appreciation and chilling narratives. Singh has employed many narrators in the novel *Delhi: A novel* to discuss the history of the city of Delhi. One of them is Bhagmati who, unlike other transgender characters, has been shown as a powerful and acceptingly visible transgender. The novel discussed the theme of queerness with reference to Delhi's upheaval and mystifying the foundation of a city as well as a community.

Hijra Narrators as Mouthpiece:

Both the writers i.e. Arundhati Roy and Khushwant Singh are pioneers of their domain as writers. Choosing a transgender narrator to depict the various incidents and drawing parallels in life is depicted as a bold choice for the both writers. Khushwant Singh's approach to show off his narrator is different from that of Arundhati Roy. Bhagmati – the transgender narrator of the novel *Delhi: A Novel* is a simple yet powerful character. The ruined fate of the city Delhi has been compared with the dying fate of transgenders in India. The city which was once the heart of the culture and was so grand, has lost its appearance and grandeur status over the years by being robbed by different kings and rulers. Similarly, the stature that the Hijras, or Eunuchs celebrated in the olden times has been robbed over time.

Whoever took over Delhi, twisted the fate of the transgendered community in India. The worse hit was made by the British who had a disturbing view about the transgenders in India:

“. . . The colonization brought a different attitude towards the transgenders. They were begun to be treated indifferently and the constant ridiculing of their physique and habits led to a psychological trauma. Casually the society passes various abusive remarks and even the family criticizes them. The current status of transgender in India is pathetic”.
(Subapriya 2016)

Bhagmati has been given power by the writer as she saves the life of Mr. Singh who was journalist covering the riots of 1984 based on communal intersection, but the case isn't so throughout the novel. Having a weak and timid start and practically no audible words from Bhagmati herself depicts that the power she gets in the end is the result of her relationship with Mr. Singh. Other than that, she is just “the other” person, and Mr. Singh seems to speak on her behalf throughout the novel.

“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”.”
(Arora 2017)

“Furthermore, not letting Bhagmati speak her own story is also figurative of the absence of hijra

voice and subjectivity.” (Arora, 2017)

Similarly, in the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the narrator is Aftab aka who is a Hermaphrodite just like Bhagmati in Singh’s novel. Hermaphrodites are people with both male and female sex organs and they could end up associating themselves with either of the gender irrespective of the dominance of the other gender’s sex organs. Hence, Aftab was effeminate. He did not associate himself as a male but instead always felt close to his feminine side. After the enlightenment, he emerges as Anjum.

Anjum is the narrator among many other characters as narrators and she is a transgender entity just like Bhagmati. “He’s a She. He’s not a He or a She. He’s a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!” (Roy, 2017:12). The writer uses a transgender narrator to put emphasis on the plight of them by employing a voice from within their circle only. Anjum who was fond of singing had to stop going to the music class because the other students used to make fun of her effeminate sense of being and she couldn’t take it. Wherever she went, she was ridiculed for being different and had to “abandon education because social conventions impose a limit on her, to move and think independently.” (Raina, 2017)

“She projected a transgender as a protagonist (and a narrator). By doing that she has given chances to the readers to have glimpse over such life, a life considered as a curse. But Anjum was never ashamed of her. She became what she wanted to and never afraid of taking a step ahead. She was capable of building for herself ‘Jannat’, a heaven. She also adopted a girl child named her Zainab and started to have a family.” (Raj 2018)

The central idea of employing a transgender narrator is to bring out the problems and plight into light and make the society feel ashamed of the behaviour they give to marginalized class of people.

Other Transgender Characters:

Presence of third gender is not new in Indian history and culture. There have been traces on the presence of people of third gender over the many ages. “The ancient Indian texts, particularly Brahminical, Buddhist, and Jain, written from around 1500 BCE, often narrate tales about the third sex and Hijras.” (Reddy, 2007)

“The concept of *tritiyaprakriti* or *napumsakah* had been an integral part of the Hindu mythology, folklore, epic and early Vedic and Puranic literatures. The term *napumsaka* had been used to denote the absence of procreative ability, presented by signifying difference from masculine and female markers. Thus, some of the early texts extensively dealt with issues of sexuality and the idea of third gender which was an established thought therein. In fact, the Jain text even mentions the concept of psychological sex, which emphasized the psychological make-up of an individual, distinct from their sexual characteristics.” (Michelraj, 2015)

The selected novels throw light about transgenderism through various characters mentioned in the books. In the novel, *Delhi: A novel* by Khushwant Singh, Singh employs the technique of comparison wherein he draws the parallels in the conditions of Bhagmati – a modern Indian Hijra with that of other withstanding

transgenders in olden times and their treatment in the society.

“While going through the history of kingship, wars, mutinies, communal riots, jihads, sexual violence and lusty encounters, we also come to know about the existence of the eunuchs within the palaces who also had their meagre share in initiating the power game.” (Roy, 2015)

The character of Khusro Khan in the novel depicts the presence of transgenderism in Mughal era of Indian society as well. Khusro Khan was womanly man with fair complexion and huge buttocks just like that of a woman and he used to take pleasure in flaunting out his womanly body and mannerisms. These mannerisms were well liked by the Sultan, who was the lover of Khusro Khan. He used to wear make up and wear the dresses of women to lure the Sultan. The roles of the lover and the beloved i.e. the man and the woman were inter-changeable between Khusro and Sultan.

Another character discussed in the novel is Basant Ali Khan who is depicted as deceitful and frustrated in term of sex. Basant Ali is shown as a person who exerts power on women like Alice and rapes her. “What the hijdas lack in the real stuff they make up for by doing lots of other things” (Singh, 1990). This tendency is generalized by Alice when she declares that all Hijras are like that and they take advantage of women in brutal ways, but she does not understand that it may be brutal but in the advent of jihaad and riots,

“everyone is struggling within his/her own periphery to come to the centre which is denied to him/her. In between ‘his’ and ‘her’ lies the slash in which lies someone’s existence and identity which we are intentionally and

perpetually oblivious about.” (Roy, 2017)

In the novel *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, after running away from her home, Aftab also leaves behind his old identity and decides to pursue his soul’s request by being a woman. He goes to ‘khwabgah’, the residence of other Hijras who live under one roof together as families. The Khwabgah is owned by the leader – Ustan Kulsoom Bi and her chelas live together sharing the common dream and common problems.

“Each fights a personal battle—as one says, “Indo-Pak is *inside* us” (Roy, 2017:27). These inner struggles, along with the reality of the tumultuous world in which they live, threaten to tear them apart. Like all of us, though, they seek to be healed, to be accepted, and to be cared for, and it is this human desire that brings them together and unites them.” (Knopfdoubleday)

The guru-chela relationship is the most important in a transgender aka Hijra’s life. Once a transgender pursue to be pen about his identity and gender has to undergo a process of being accepted as a recognized Hijra wherein they undergo a series of rituals for a week and followed by castration and the ceremony to be adopted by a guru, then the chela owes everything to the guru and consider him/her as her God. Aftaab leaves behind his family and seeks the path to be Anjum.

“Ordinary people in the Duniya—what did they know about what it takes to live a life of Hijra? What did they know about the rules, the discipline and the sacrifices? Who today knew that there had been times when all of them, including she, Ustad Kulsoom Bi herself, had been driven to begging for alms at

traffic lights? That they had built themselves up, bit by bit, humiliation by humiliation, from there? The Khwabgah was called Khwabgah because it was where special people, blessed people, came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya. In the Khwabgah, Holy souls trapped in the wrong bodies were liberated. (Roy, 53)."

Kulsoom Bi who is the head of Khwabgah manages not only the day-to-day working of her chelas who happen to be sex-workers mainly; and looks after the personal problems of her chelas and accepts Anjum with open arms in the new world which is totally different and difficult for a newbie. Kulsoom Bi understands that there are long running superstitions about Hijras that they kidnap, and castrate boys is totally opposed by her and she explains this to Anjum that transgenderism is all about consent. Other transgender characters of Khwabgah include Gudiya, Bulbul, Bismillah, Razia, Nimmo and Gorakhpuri.

"In fact, the entire world of Hijras is intensely crammed. In the course of the novel, they try to rise and live over and over from the ashes of discrimination. Nimmo Gorakhpuri, contemplating on the God's purpose of creating Hijras, refers, "it was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So he made us" (Roy, 23). Again, Nimmo calls Hijras as "jackals who feed off other people's happiness, we are all happiness hunters." (Roy, 24) These isolated residents of 'Khwabgah' to 'Jannat Guest House' are trapped in-between two opposite worlds.

'Khwabgah' is a place, signifying to fulfill the shattered dreams of 'Duniya.'" (Raina, 2017)

With such characters the different problems of a Hijra household and Hijra people have been dealt with by Arundhati Roy and Khushwant Singh with great precision and great presentation. Third gendered population is a major part of Indian society from olden ages and have seen a decline in their social status. Through this paper, the aim is to reflect on the ways this society is being driven and outcasting long withholding traditions and legacy of the culture. To bring a change, a voice is needed and hope stands that this will ensure some knowledge in the minds of the young generations who are the future of the society and nation.

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