

Gender Dysphoria in Anita Nair's *Cut Like Wound*

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Abstract

The article begins by providing a brief introduction to the genre of crime fiction to place the chosen novel in context. It then introduces the novel *Cut Like Wound*. The article further examines the circumstances that instilled in Chikka the desire to be a woman and discusses Chikka's feminine qualities. Subsequent discussions focus on Chikka's masculinity in terms of his assertion of power. Based on the analysis, the article establishes that Chikka can be identified as queer. Further discussion addresses the plight of Hijras and the status accorded to them in a positive light. The article concludes by highlighting how the Indian Penal Code ensures justice by punishing criminals.

Keywords: Gender Dysphoria, Masculinity, Femininity, Queer, Hijra, Incongruence, Unconsciousness, Repressed Desires, Crime Fiction.

Introduction

Crime fiction has received wide acclaim due to its unexpected twists, suspense surrounding the murderer, and detailed investigation procedures. Some notable psychopaths in crime literature include Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*, Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*, and Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*. Crime fiction not only focuses on the murderer but also unveils the psychological motivations behind their crimes (Krishna and Varghese 67).

Cut Like Wound is the first detective/crime novel by Anita Nair, published in 2012 by Harper Collins. The title was suggested by Nair's brother, a doctor, who remarked that the wound described in the story was a "cut-like wound," a term used in police jargon. Nair was captivated by the sound and chose it as the title (Pavani 153).

The title can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. Literally, it refers to how the murderer used a ligature coated with glass to strangle victims and leave "cut-like" wounds. Victims include Liaquat (a male prostitute burned alive), Mohan (a steward in a Kerala restaurant), Kothanda Raman (a pharmacist), Rupesh, among others. Metaphorically, it reflects the mental wounds suffered by characters. For instance, Borei Gowda, the detective protagonist, suffers emotionally from seeing his ex-lover Urmila after twenty-seven years, dealing with his drug-addicted son Roshan, and estrangement from his family. He is also frustrated at remaining an inspector despite long service, which motivates him to prove his efficiency by solving the homicides.

Chikka, alias Bhuvana, is haunted by a bitter past and experiences a sense of castration due to her brother's intervention and society's non-acceptance. The novel is set in Bangalore and structured as diary entries (by date, day, and time) from an omniscient point of view, spanning from the 1st of August evening (the first day of Ramadan) to September 8th (St. Mary's Feast). The book delves into investigative procedures, and to ensure authenticity, Nair interacted with police officials. She stated in an interview with Manjula Narayan in *Hindustan Times*:

"I went to many police stations and at every place drank the same kind of tea, coffee, and was given the same type of sanitised report" (Pavani 152).

Nair further learned about the selection of criminal informers and third-degree interrogation techniques, which she incorporated into the novel (Pavani 152). According to *The Sunday Guardian*, the novel also serves as a commentary on the lives of sexually marginalized communities, especially regarding the blurring of gender expectations and emotional burdens of both men and women (Gupta 127-128).

Discussion

This article explores the concept of Gender Dysphoria in *Cut Like Wound*. Dr. Leena Mole Harale, in her article *Identity Flux: A Critical Study of Representation*

of a Transgender Character in Anita Nair's *Cut Like Wound*, quotes the American Psychiatric Association defining Gender Dysphoria as:

“A state in which a person is preoccupied with a strong urge to be the other gender, different from the assigned gender” (Harale 63).

Chikka, the younger brother of corporate Ravikumar, was male by birth and a shrewd boy who could solve complex calculations mentally. As a young man, he engaged in a homosexual relationship with Ranganathan, the factory owner where his mother worked. His brother ended the relationship, reflecting society's perception of anything other than heterosexual relationships as taboo. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, states that incest taboos specify which types of relationships are prohibited and permitted (Butler 93). Chikka's brother's attitude highlights society's restriction on homosexual relationships, which had a lasting impact on Chikka.

Chikka decided to become a woman through cross-dressing to attract men and seek social acceptance. His meticulous attention to clothing, accessories, and perfumes demonstrates his ardent desire to assume a female identity. Gender Dysphoria suggests that a person not only wishes to be another gender but also possesses its characteristics (Harale 62). Chikka's inherent feminine qualities are evident, consistent with Simone de Beauvoir's observation that “one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman” (*The Second Sex*, 293).

Initially, Chikka dressed as a woman privately, highlighting his coyness—a trait typically associated with women. He also displayed narcissism, defined as cognitive and affective preoccupation with the self, including vanity, arrogance, and self-absorption (Krishna and Varghese 68). Chikka, as Bhuvana, walked the streets adorned in bangles, earrings, a necklace, and perfume, expressing delight in her transformed identity (Nair 4).

Bhuvana exhibited submissiveness and tenderness, initiating a romantic relationship with Sanjay. Judith Butler emphasizes that gender is a performative fabrication expressed through stylized repetition of words, actions, and gestures (Butler 179). Bhuvana's emotional response to Sanjay's death, including weeping, aligns with socially ascribed female emotional expressions.

Gender Dysphoria posits that a person identifies with the desired gender's feelings and reactions (Harale 63). When Liaquat, the male prostitute, doubted

Bhuvana's gender, it hurt her feelings and provoked a violent response, reflecting Chikka's conviction of her female identity. Freud's concept of unconsciousness, a repository of repressed desires, applies here; Chikka's desire for power manifests through violent acts against victims, asserting dominance over men who previously constrained him (Dobie 56; Nair 351).

While Chikka possesses feminine qualities, her violent acts also demonstrate masculine traits, reflecting incongruence between assigned and experienced gender. This blend of characteristics identifies her as queer, as defined by Sajan: a person possessing both masculine and feminine traits and deviating from societal norms (Sajan 526-527).

The novel also addresses the plight of transgender communities. According to the American Psychiatric Association, transgender individuals have a gender identity different from their sex assigned at birth (Harale 62). Characters Ananya and Prabha, two Hijras, exemplify the marginalization and degradation they face, often forced into begging or sex work (Nair 130). In contrast, Chikka exercises agency by becoming Bhuvana on Fridays, guided by the goddess Durga's instructions. The choice of name and day signifies her identification as a messenger of the goddess.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Cut Like Wound* demonstrates that Chikka alias Bhuvana had specific intentions behind the homicides. Ultimately, she is arrested, illustrating that justice may be delayed but is not denied. Her targeting of male victims can be interpreted as a warning to men not to insult or marginalize sexually marginalized communities.

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