

The Place of Third Gender in Arundhati Roy's Novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Dr. Bipin Bihari Dash

Assistant Professor in English

Odisha University of Technology and Research

(Formerly CET, Bhubaneswar)

Bhubaneswar-751029 Odisha, India

Abstract

India is a multicultural country. It represents different cultures, customs and ideologies. The transgender community existed before a long time. Transgender, third gender and (Hijras) are considered as neither man nor woman and are being subjected to social exclusion and alienation from time to time. These people are shunned by both family and society equally, and face severe identity crisis as they could not define themselves in the conventional male and female spheres. Throughout the world, they are marginalized and forced to live a life of an "other." Their education as well as public space is restricted or they choose to live a life of seclusion due to certain limitations. The recent rules and regulations of India is a ray of hope for the transgender. In 2014 verdict of the Supreme Court of India declares transgender is the third-gender. This paper attempts to analyze trans-gender discrimination and identity crisis as reflected in the protagonist, Anjum of Arundhati Roy's 2017 novel The Ministry of the Utmost Happiness.

Keywords: Transgender, Hijra (Eunuch), Marginalization, Queer, LGBT

Our society, in general, acknowledges only two polarities or sexes based on the genitalia at the time of birth and they are male and female through the process of sex assignment. Sex assignment takes place even before birth in the mother's womb basing on the external genitalia. But, there are some exemptions in which the infants cannot be easily identified as male or female in live births. In such cases, sex chromosomes, external genitalia and internal reproductive system do not confirm to the males and females and they are called as intersexual. Such intersexual is considered as third gender or transgender where they do not belong to either gender.

Third gender is a concept in which individuals are categorized, either by themselves or by society, as neither man nor woman. The term third is usually understood to mean "other". The state of personally identifying as, or being identified by society as, a man, a woman, or other,

is usually also defined by the individual's gender identity and gender role in the particular culture in which they live. Most cultures use a gender binary, having two genders (boys/men and girls/women). The term "third gender" has also been used to describe the hijras of India who have gained legal identity. A culture recognizing a third gender does not in itself mean that they were valued by that culture, and often is the result of explicit devaluation of women in that culture.

Gender and sex are generally used as interchangeable terms. However, these terms differ from each other. They are socially constructed. Sex of a person is biological. The society decides the roles for each gender and expects them to act accordingly and those who act differently to their gender are considered as queer. Gender identity differs for each person. Transgender is one whose gender identity does not match with their biological sex. "Transgender is the state of one's "gender identity" not matching one's "assigned sex". (Golden Kisha 2013)

Conventionally, men and women are defined by binary oppositions but when the attributes of 'male' and 'female', or 'masculine' and 'feminine' get mixed up in a cultural or literary representation it creates gender issues. To understand the role of third gender in Indian environment, it is an indispensable thing to know about 'sex' and 'gender'. It is pertinent to note that B. K. Das has precisely mentioned in his book entitled Twentieth Century Literary Criticism.

To many critics gender is a social and cultural construct, while sex is a biological and natural. Sex is associated with biological reproduction, whereas gender is a notion of masculinity and femininity. For example, in India we take the country or nation as a feminine gender and hence, we call Mother India. If the country for us is motherland, for others, it is a fatherland. River for us is a feminine gender. This is our cultural construct (149).

Judith Pamela Butler is an American philosopher and gender theorist whose work has influenced political philosophy, ethics, and the fields of third-wave feminism, queer theory, and literary theory. Sex, for Butler, "is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms" (Bodies 2). Butler holds that distinguishing biological sex from social gender is unintelligible. For her, both are socially constructed:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (Butler 1999, 10–11)

In the essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Judith Butler proposes that gender is performative. Because gender identity is established through behaviour, there is a possibility to construct different genders via different behaviours. Most people ordinarily seem to think that sex and gender are coextensive: women are human females, men are human males. Many feminists have historically disagreed and have endorsed the sex/ gender distinction. Provisionally: 'sex' denotes human females and males depending on biological features (chromosomes, sex organs, hormones and other physical features); 'gender' denotes women and men depending on social factors (social role, position, behaviour or identity). The main feminist motivation for making this distinction was to counter biological determinism or the view that biology is destiny.

The famous feminist of Indian writing in English, Das (1982) in the poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs" portrayed the objectification of the eunuchs who adopted women identity and thus they were defined by the normative rules. Das mentioned that, "It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came to dance, wide skirts going round and round. They danced and they danced, oh, they danced till they bled" (P.7).

Nevertheless, the existence of third gender and its identity is greatly neglected in our societies. Especially, in Indian society either male or female is considered as normal and anything or anyone that is other than male or female is considered abnormal or subhuman, which means they are not complete humans but are on an inferior level. Social construction of gender as well as the sexual difference is very much part of the process of Gender Identity. Ironically, social construction of gender, especially in Indian society is confined to either male or female and the third gender is always neglected and more over marginalized and insulted. It really takes a lot of audacity and courage in our society to merely acknowledge the third gender. It is a very common sight at railway stations and at traffic signals where the transgenders are insulated and are avoided. Their touch pollutes and their curses come true - is the belief. However, the existence of third gender or transgender people in India is not a new phenomenon. Transgender have a long history in India:

'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. (Delli Swararaos 2016)

Hijras (transgenders) are isolated from the society, deprived of their basic rights and forced to lead a life without self-respect even in post globalised position. They are subjugated by male, female and even by hijras within the society. The word hijra is derived from the

Persian word *hiz* which means ineffective and incompetent. The alternative words for *hijra* are *hijada*, *hijara*, *hijrah*, and it is pronounced as “*heejra*” or “*heejda*”. The word *hijra* refers to ‘eunuchs’ or ‘third gender’ in India and some South Asian countries. Though they have combined gender identities, they adopted feminine gender roles and adorned themselves with feminine attires. In India, transgenders are called with different names in different parts of the country. They are known as *Hijras*, *eunuchs*, *tirunangais*, *khoja*, *aravanis* etc and they had been part of Indian society for centuries. Their existence can be seen in the mythological texts of the land ‘*Ramayana*’ and ‘*Mahabharata*’.

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)

At present it is a very common sight in Indian railways and at many traffic signals of metropolitan cities or towns – that a group of transgenders, or *hijras*, clad in traditional sarees or *chudidars*, aggressively begging from the people clapping their hands. Rural transgender or *hijra* sections are not just marginalized because of flouting gender norms, but are also oppressed by caste and class hierarchies, which intersect with gendered oppression to compound their disempowerment within social structures. Peter Berry succinctly presents “... ‘queer theory’ or ‘queer studies’, terms increasingly used by gays, in spite of the homophobic origins of the word ‘queer’ as an abusive word in the context. These terms ... identity of political and social interests with gay men. (Beginning Theory, P 137-138)

Arundhati Roy is a keen observer of the different issues of Indian society. She is not only a notable novelist but also an activist and a social reformer. She writes to spread awareness among people about the marginal, downtrodden section of society. Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* deals with the transgender issues. Marginalization of this group in Indian society is depicted through the main character *Anjum*. The novel unfolds unbearable bitter truths of society such as the condition of the marginalized groups of society who are victims of injustice, inequality and prejudice. It illustrates the sufferings, pain and the right of the LGBT community in contemporary India. The novel also recounts some of the horrific events of Contemporary Indian history such as land reform of 2002, Godhra train burning and Kashmir insurgency.

Anjum is a transgender woman who was born with both male and female sex organs. Through the character of *Anjum*, Roy reveals various forms of discrimination that exist against women. The society which she lives in is a patriarchal one. Therefore, her mother is naturally compelled to consider the transgender child as a boy and gives the name *Aftab*, though she has the option of considering the child a female since the child has female genitals

too. However, her choice of recognizing her child as a boy reveals that women are considered inferior to men, and if the opportunity is given, it is always better to be considered a man in the society to enjoy certain privileges. Anjum survives in a shrine where all other pilgrims except her are brutally murdered. She is not murdered simply because killing a transgender woman is considered bad luck. Through this instance, Roy highlights the fact that gender creates many problems to people and in a way; not belonging to any gender will bring peace and sometimes save one's life.

As Aftab grew up he has interest in music but has to give up studies. At the age of nine, he continued to attend music classes. He had sweet, true singing voice and could pick up a tune after hearing it just once. At first people were amused and even encouraging, but soon the snickering and teasing from other children began. "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, 12).

In India the third gender community still is fighting for their civil rights. Society treated them very indifferently and they are ambiguous about their future. They beg for to survive. In the text Roy has captured the transformation, the plight, the struggle of Anjum which symbolically presented for every transgender living in a democratic country. Society has failed to provide equal rights to the community and they are treated as shame. 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. Roy used the metaphor of a tree to describe the life of Anjum. She describes:

She lived in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and welcomed the bats home. At dusk she did the opposite. Between shifts she conferred with the ghosts of vultures that loomed in her high branches. She felt gentle grip of their talons like an ache in an amputated limb. She gathered they weren't altogether unhappy at having excused themselves and exited from the story. (3)

In the opening paragraph, Roy made very clear about the protagonist Anjum who is an epitome of strength, patience and power. She has the courage to accept the feminine side as well as the nasty opinion of people about her being a transgender. She has the courage to transform the graveyard into a heaven for herself and create a new world. As a tree she also opened the doors for other helpless rejected people. Roy completely contradicts the belief of the society that transgenders are abnormal.

Roy depicted the plight of the transgenders in Indian society through the protagonist Anjum. These characters are mostly torn between binaries male/female, love/hate, and life/death and so on. They attempt to remake themselves through, 'naming' and 're-naming'

which turns out as a heroic but unsuccessful exercise. Such characters try to locate their identity in the complex, social, and gender taxonomy, cultured by dominant class from various prevalent and divisive socio-religious discourses. There is a complex history behind the segregation of this under class group.

At the age of fifteen Aftab stepped permanently into another universe. With the rules and rituals initiated to formally make him a member of the Hijra community, the next night he was presented with a green Khwabgah dupatta and initiated into the traditions that formally made him a member of Hijra community. Here Aftab became Anjum, disciple of Ustad Kulsoom Bi, head of the household and had to live a life outside “Duniya”. Kulsoom Bi describes the agony of Hijra’s in one of her conversation with Anjum as:

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)

Anjum was finally able to dress in the clothes that she longed to wear. She learned to communicate with the signature spread-fingered Hijra clap. On Anjum's eighteenth birthday, Hijras from all over the city came. For the first time in her life, she wore a sari, a red „disco sari. She dreamed that she was a new bride on her wedding night. She awoke distressed to find that her sexual pleasure had expressed itself into her beautiful new garment like a man’s. She felt humiliated and howled like a wolf, hitting herself on her head and between her legs, screaming with self-inflicted pain. Ustad Kulsoom Bi managed to calm her. The word Hijra, she said, meant a body in which the holy soul lives. Kwabgah is one such place where the Hijra’s hope to liberate there. “Holy Soul” trapped in their wrong bodies. Anjum through her transformations tries to redefine her life. Motherhood is something they longed to attain, but remained as a forever dream.

Anjum at the age of forty- six left the Khwabgah. Her father had died and her mother was bed-ridden. She found her dwelling place in a graveyard, and lived there next to her father for the rest of her life. It was the beginning of her new life. Anjum was so desolate and distressed that she was least bothered of Jinns and ghosts in the graveyard. She looked like a

lifeless body. Her emotions have been crushed to the ground. But she bravely fought against all the evil forces, within and outside to survive and prosper. For months, Anjum lived in the graveyard. She stopped grooming herself, stopped dying her hair. Facial hairs appeared. She no more took the hormone injection to cover her masculinity. She decided to be herself. Her old acquaintances came in search of her. They were willing to provide her with hot meals; one of them gifted her phone. Her music teacher Ustad Hameed, who taught her at young age, became a regular visitor. He would sit on some grave with Anjum's harmonium. Imam Ziauddin visits daily and request Anjum to read papers to him.

Her tin shack scaled up. It grew first into a hut and then into a small house, over the time she began to enclose the graves of her relatives and build rooms around them. Gradually her house became known as the Jannat Guest House, because it was the hub, for Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas". (Roy, 67, 68)

Gradually, Anjum began to enclose the graves of her relatives and build rooms around them. She began to rent them to down-and-out travellers. She called her guesthouse 'Jannat' i.e., 'Paradise'. Gradually Jannat became a hub for Hijras. She celebrated Eid and Diwali with great pompous nature in her paradise with her friends. In creating "Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services" Anjum has created a space that catches those who fall off the grid, for whom family, society, religion, caste, and class no longer holds any meaning. They don't belong. Anjum understands what it's like to not fit in anywhere, or belong and how difficult it would have been for her. The graveyard reinforces Anjum's plight as a transgender in the world, a state of void and non-existence. She tries to overcome the fear of her mortality by referring to the graveyard as a paradise. She tries to unsettle and obliterate the division between the living and the dead, the state of existence and non-existence in her attempt to overcome the ambivalent state of her existence. So when the municipal authorities warn her from living in the graveyard, she tells them that she was not living in the graveyard but that she was dying in it.

The novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* deals with Khwabgah, the house of dreams where the transgender community lives. The house is metaphoric because in this hostile world this is the only place where the transgender people can fulfil their dreams, where they can be in their own self. They can find their existence and quench their desire. Khwabgah accepts all people from different shades and shapes of life. At the end, Anjum's graveyard home comes to function as a secular, multi-faith, sanctuary protected by will power from the turbulent outside world. It becomes 'Jannat' for her and other deprived people take shelter there. In this way, Roy presents the place of third gender in her novel.

Conclusion

Hijras belong to marginal economic structure of our nation. It is important that people should come forward to eradicate discrimination and economic hardship that they are facing. After all, they are human beings, and they have rights to live with dignity and respect. The world needs to change. Gender does not matter when it comes to a heart of acceptance. Change in gender creates no difference in the emotions, pains, sufferings, care, love and anger in a person. It is just an emotional state of our mind. When society fails to understand this, the voice protest comes out. So, feminists arose when women were marginalized. In the present world, the transgender community needs an up-rise after all the hardships they underwent. Transgenders are a very integral part of our culture and it's high time we leave the stigma about them and inculcate them in the mainstream of our society. In a nutshell, it is pointed out that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) should be treated intelligently, unsightly and astutely.

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