



VOICING THE UNVOICED: A STUDY OF THIRD GENDER CONDITIONS THROUGH THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS

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Abstract: Hermaphroditism has various legends and myths in philosophical, literary, and religious scriptures of classical times concerning its origin and development. The Vedas do not exclude the role of intersex people. The lives of transgender or intersex people in the Vedic Period were respectable and content simultaneously. In the Middle Ages, the position of transgender or intersex people changed drastically, gender dysphoria a psychological disorder boomed in the Trans-people. People have been exploring culturally diverse India since times immemorial, they have brought to us different discourses out of their exploration such as colonialism, postcolonialism, nationalism, internationalism, and many more but the least attention has been given to the issues of intersex people. This paper supposes that contemporary India is facing cultural, social, political, religious, and economic anarchy, and in the prevailing chaos, the minorities such as LGBT suffer within the context of Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.

Keywords: Hermaphrodite, Transgender, Identity Crises, Gender Dysphoria, Marginalisation.

Introduction

According to the online Britannica Encyclopaedia, "Hermaphroditism [is] a condition of having both male and female reproductive organs." Daston and Park say in *The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature* that in Aristotle's opinion there was not enough matter to create twins of different sexes so there came one with both female and male genitals (qtd. in *Of Hermaphrodite*). Plato, according to Patrick Cheney's "The New Inn" and Plato's Myth of the Hermaphrodite" said that the first humans were all hermaphrodites, however, they were broken apart by jealous gods (qtd. in *Of Hermaphrodite*). In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid narrates a story of a youthful boy, the son of the god Hermes and goddess Aphrodite, hence, the name Hermaphroditus. The nymph Salmacis was in love with the youth but he rejected her advances. Somehow, she convinced him into the pool where she was a spirit, and with divine help was united with the young boy. On seeing himself half man and half woman, Hermaphroditus curses the pool. Thereafter, whosoever drank water from the pool would end up becoming effeminate.

India has a diverse culture. People around the world throng to explore it. Indian is the world's oldest civilization. It has the world's earliest literary records. The Vedas are about the human race and culture of times immemorial. The Vedas do not exclude the role of intersex people, references show the humanistic approach of Vedas. "In the Vedic literature, the gender of the human being is precisely divided into three categories according to Prakriti or nature. They are Pums-Prakriti or male, Stri-Prakriti or female, and Tritiya-Prakriti or third sex" (Amara Das, GALVA 108, Qtd in *Transgender Identity as Hidden in Vedic Literature and Society* by Vasumathi T & Geethanjali M). The members of the third sex, the children, the elderly, the impotent, and the celibate were called Napumsaka, who were not engaged in procreation and were considered a symbol of good luck. In Vedic culture, Tritiya-Prakriti or third gender were given social, political, civil, and economic rights and liberties. The Hindu religious scriptures have various references: in the Puranas, the avatar of Vishnu- literally translated Mohini which means the enchantress. "The origins of Shankara – Narayanan (Hariharan) in the Linga Purana is attributed to the merging of Shiva and Mohini (Vishnu)" (Vasumathi & Geethanjali, IJHSSI 62). When Lord Rama was banished from the kingdom for 14 years, people of all genders and castes followed him. When they reached the outskirts of Ayodha, Ram told that all the men and women should go back to the city of Ayodha, not aware that there were also intersex people in the folk. After coming back, he found all the intersex people were waiting for him at that particular place. Moved by their devotion, love, and loyalty he "Sanctions them the power to confer blessings on 11 people on auspicious occasions like childbirth and marriage, and also at inaugural functions" (Ramanuj n.pg). Thus, the lives of transgender or intersex people in ancient times were respectable and simultaneously content. They had their roles to play in the society. During the earliest times, their souls were considered pious and righteous.

In the Middle Ages, the position of transgender or intersex people changed drastically as pointed out by Michael Foucault in *Abnormal*. He says “from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century ... hermaphrodites were considered to be monsters and were executed, burnt at the stake and their ashes thrown to the winds” (Qtd. in *Intersex People in History*). In response, Christof Rolker says, “there is no evidence for hermaphrodites being persecuted in the Middle Ages” (Qtd. in *Intersex People in History*). The early modern and postmodern periods witnessed many upheavals in the case of intersex or transgender people’s rights, liberties, and equalities. In fact, in contemporary times various institutions are making decisions and laws in favour of these marginalized communities, nevertheless, discrimination persists. Some of the provisions given to the intersex community are anti-discrimination laws concerning gender identity, recognition of same-sex couples (e.g., unregistered cohabitation, life partnership), right to change legal gender, third gender option, homosexuality declassified as an illness, etc.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Arundhati Roy’s second fiction came out after two decades of her debut Booker Prize winner *The God of Small Things* (1997). Her second novel has multiple narratives that make it an allegory of modern India. The present study is about the marginalisation of the intersex communities in contemporary India. The study is limited to the issues of transgender folk of India within the context of the novel. Anjum, a hermaphrodite is a protagonist in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. She experiences the cruelty of society, “. . . like a tree would – without flinching. She didn’t turn to see which small boy had thrown a stone at her, didn’t crane her neck to read the insults scratched into her bark” (Roy 3). In the novel, the intersex people of Old Delhi live in Khwabgah which in Urdu means the house of dreams and the outside world, they call Duniya. The issues of sexual identity and gender dysphoria, identity crises, marginalisation, suffering, and discrimination to the intersex community form the content of this paper.

Anjum is suffering from gender dysphoria. It is a psychological discomfort and distress in the people who ascribe gender identities to themselves which “differ from their sex assigned at birth or sex-related physical characteristics” (Mayo Clinic Staff n. pg.). Gender dysphoria is common in transgender and gender-nonconforming people though some are excluded. As a child, Anjum is interested in music and singing which are considered womanly characteristics according to her father, on other hand, her father Mulakat Ali, tries to assign her masculine gender traits by narrating the stories of war and valour of their ancestors. Zainab who is abandoned on the stairs of Jamia Masjid Old Delhi is picked by Anjum and later on becomes her mother. After witnessing the oppression of the female gender Anjum decides to assign Zainab masculine gender by putting on her boys’ clothes. There is resistance to her decision by the other members of Khwabgah who believe that everyone has the choice to take gender identity.

Identity crises is a prominent theme in modern literature, when a fictional character is unable to locate herself in the socially and self-constructed identity that may be called identical crises. Identical crises may result in psychological phobias like inferiority or superiority complexes. Such characters identify themselves as masters or slaves under the projection of social values, material, and power. The instances of identity crises in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are subtle, for example, the “man who knew the English told Anjum that her name was written backward in English spelled Majnu. In the English version of the story of Laila and Majnu . . . Majnu was called Romeo and Laila was Juliet” (Roy 4). To this Anjum replied, “You mean I have made *Khichdi* of their story?” Next time when they meet, the man who knew English said that he had made a mistake her name spelled backward is Mujna which doesn’t mean anything to this Anjum replied,

“It doesn’t matter. I am all of them, I am Romi and Juli, I am Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum, I am Anjuman. I am a *mehfil*, I am a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone’s invited” (Roy 4).

The marginalisation of transgender in cultural and social constructions is highlighted through the conversation between Anjum and blind Imam Ziauddin whom she read newspapers. Anjum usually did not hurt someone emotionally so when he asked her, “Is it true that even the Hindus among you are buried, not cremated?” She tried to deviate, “True? Is what true? What is Truth?” The Imam wasn’t willing to disjunct from the track, he uttered a line – “Sach Khuda hai. Khuda hi Sach hai. Truth is God. God is Truth” (Roy 5). Roy says in the novel that sort of wisdom is available at every corner of social frenzy especially “on the backs of the painted trucks that roared down the highways” (Roy 5). The Imam othering Anjum/intersex people, “tell me, you people, when you die, where do they bury you? Who bathes the bodies? Who says the prayers?” (Roy 5). This conversation depicts the social marginalisation of intersex people who are being treated like non-humans out of the social structure.

Intersex people are vulnerable to social discrimination as realised by Jahanara Begum in the novel while contemplating what she has produced. “When she discovered, nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part” (Roy 7). She was terrified to introspect the life of her child. She only knew the world of binaries where “all things, not just living things but all things - carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments - had a gender” (Roy 7). She is caught in the dilemma of her child’s identity, she knew a word (Hijra) for such people, actually two words Kinnar and Hijra, “but two words do not make a language” (Roy 7). She contemplates living outside language is not possible. The concern of Jahanara Begum for her child in the novel resembles the social and cultural place value of intersex people who are considered the outsiders in the hierarchical structure of the society. Anjum was good at music and singing, she could “pick up a tune after hearing it just once” (Roy 12). People and children started to praise and encourage her but soon the teasing (“He’s a She. He’s is not a He or a She. He’s is a He and She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!” Roy 12) led her to renounce the school, for she cannot endure such psychological pain.

The fictional intersex characters who live in the Khwabgah – the House of Dreams – are the representations of the trauma and sufferings collectively. When Anjum was new in the Khwabgah, Nimmo asked her, “Do you know why God made Hijras?” “No, why?” replied Anjum. “It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So, he made us” explained Nimmo. She added, “We’re jackals who feed off other people’s happiness, we’re Happiness Hunters. *Khushikhor* was the phrase she used” (Roy 23-24). The ghettoization or the victimization of intersex people is well described through the characters in the fiction, like Bismallah (Bimla) who has converted to Islam after being thrown out of the house by her husband a

driver of Delhi Transport Corporation for not bearing him any child. Now she lived in the Khwabgah having the kitchen and security “against unwanted intruders” at her command.

The conflicts that intersex people experience is horrible and heart-wrenching, through the voice of Nimmo, issues are highlighted. To Nimmo, the issues which lead to the unhappiness of normal people are: “Price-rise, children’s school-admissions, husbands’ beatings, wives’ cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war” (Roy 23). These issues to normal people are external that can easily settle down but according to Nimmo, all these issues are inside the intersex people that will never settle down. “But for us,” says Nimmo, “price-rise and school-admissions and beating-husbands and cheating wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can’t” (Roy 23).

When Anjum was eighteen, her sexual orientation troubled her. She was calmed and motivated by Ustad Kulsoom Bi for the surgery. Intersex people are manipulated and ravished by normal people; the instance is evident in the novel. Dr. Mukhtar who does surgeries to enhance the genitals of intersex people is really a scam. When Anjum had gone through the surgery of removing the male part and enhancing her girl part which didn’t work properly even after the second surgery. He had also suggested some medicines “that would un-deepen her voice and help her to develop breasts . . . Dr. Mukhtar’s vagina, however, turned out to be a scam. It worked, but not in the way he said it would, not even after two corrective surgeries” (Roy 28). On the other hand, Bulbul and Gudiya who were Hindus had to go through a painful religious castration before moving to Khwabgah. It reflects the cruelty of constructed religious institutions to intersex people.

The Flyover Story depicts how the so-called guardians of people treat intersex people as they are not humans but animals. Once Anjum and her friends were attending a wedding party at a Seth’s House in South Delhi where they were invited to configure the blessings. The police broke into the scene and arrested the host and his three guests, nobody knew the reason. Arif the Matador driver had brought Anjum and her friends to the party. He tried to take his passengers into the Matador to get away from the venue. The police beat him mercilessly and dragged his passengers out of the van, “kicked on their backsides as though they were circus clowns and instructed to scream, to run all the way home if they did not want to be arrested for prostitution and obscenity . . . True, it was only a routine bit of humiliation for Hijras” (Roy 35). Flyover Story has two versions in the text one for the readers and the other for Zainab the bandicoot. The similarity in the two versions is “Anjum really did piss while she ran” (Roy 35).

The Gujarat episode changed the life of Anjum, it was the illness of Zainab that led Anjum to visit Ajmer Sharif on the recommendations of a Khadim at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. Zakir Main, the flower seller agreed to accompany Anjum to Ajmer Sharif, who had some business at Ahmedabad. After spending two days at Ajmer Sharif, they boarded a train to Ahmedabad. But unfortunately, the communal riots started in Gujrat and they were caught in the bloody riots. Zakir Main was killed by the frenzied mob but Anjum was spared, for she was a Hijra. A voice from the crowd announced, “Don’t kill her, brother, killing Hijras brings bad luck” (Roy 62). Since then, Anjum called herself a “butchers’ luck” and she never forgot the episode that later resulted in PTSD. After she was rescued by Zakir Main’s son from the refugee camp, she grew colder and rebellious. Finally, she decided to leave Khwabgah and shifted to an old graveyard where she erected a home for the people who had nowhere to go and called it Jannat Guest House.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a voice of the subaltern people, first half of the novel is the representation of the intersex community of old Delhi. In India, intersex communities are facing various social, political, economic, and cultural prejudices and biases. The ancient Indian intersex people were living a respectable and content life. Contemporary India is facing cultural, social, political, and economic anarchy, and in the prevailing chaos, the minorities such as LGBTs and others suffer. The intersex community has not been given in proper representation in social and political domains. The intersex community has been given limited space in mainstream literature. Yet, there are exceptions like Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. As literature is considered the representation of life, Roy’s novel gives this marginal community such representation and prominence in the plot. She highlights the social, political, and economic inhibitions and difficulties that the intersex guild faces and comes across in the overall interaction of life. Building the premise on this prolonged discrimination, Roy’s text has represented the general trauma and pain of this community into the various domains of Indian society at large.

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