



Understanding Gender Performativity to Mitigate Transprejudice in India: An Analysis on Vasudhendra's *Bed Bug*

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ABSTRACT

In India, transgenders have been the victims of several authorities and persecutions that they are sometimes pretended to be cast off or repudiated by the mainstream. There has been little or meagre amount of progression among the mainstream to accept and recognize them as equals to their own kind. Transgenders are often deprived of their basic rights to live, at the least survive in this country. In spite of recognising them as the 'third genders' through laws, their lives continue to harbour on to precarious circumstances, such that their cries reach only the deaf ears. Literature, a reflection of raw reality, has anchored a tantamount space to portraying the lived realities of this socially marginalised community. Vasudhendra in his *Bed Bug*, one of the short stories from the collection *Mohanaswamy*, brings to the fore, a transgender's subjection to transprejudice. This paper brings to limelight the failure of the society for its misapprehension of other shades of gender through the fictional characters. It also examines gender performativity as a tool to mitigate transprejudice to certain extent as well as to ameliorate the quality of living of the transgenders by giving voices to the visibly 'invisible'.

KEYWORDS: transgenders, family honour, transprejudice, honour killing, gender performativity, empowerment.

THE HIJRAS OF INDIA: AN INTRODUCTION

In India, transgenders are spotted at various circumstances to earn their livelihood. Some are beggars or prostitutes or are even invited to bless on auspicious occasions. There are several labels for transgenders that are used in India, per se Aravani, Thirunagai, Napunsakudu, Hijra, to name a few. Cladded in sari and khol, one can see them clapping their hands in a certain style. In fact, their claps tell us that they too make a part of the mainstream and indicate their resistance against being an outcast. Kalki Subramaniam, an artist, entrepreneur, writer, and a trans activist based in Tamil Nadu, has penned down a beautiful verse entitled *Clap Aloud*, which depicts their claps as a strong will of the transgenders to encounter ‘n’ number of tribulations. Similarly, Devdutt Pattanaik in his *Shikhandi: And other queer tales they don’t tell you*, contends that:

Ignored by the mainstream, often rejected by her own family, reduced to a joke in the popular entertainment, she claps in the crowded streets demanding to be seen. The hijras challenge not just the boundaries of gender, but also the boundaries of religion, for it is not uncommon to find a hijra with a Muslim name, using Farsi words (the court of the Mughal era), worshipping a Sufi *pir*, alongside a Hindu goddess (Pattanaik, 31-32).

At this juncture, it is of paramount significance to shed light on the lives of transgenders or hijras of India, who live in gharanas (the community of hijras with a set of culture and norms), which is seven in number. Each gharana has a nayak (head) and next in the strata is the guru. Each guru would have several chelas (daughters). Other relations include the guru’s guru- nani (grandmother), the chela’s sisters- massi (aunt) to state a few. Thus, their mere existence in the form of a community itself draws a pattern that has an ‘effect’ through their gender performativity.

CONSTRUING GENDER PERFORMATIVITY THROUGH FICTIONAL NARRATIVE

Though there are several narratives of transgenders prevalent in the contemporary era through different genres, the tribulations encountered by them has been a constant locus in fictional narratives, as well as in autobiographies. The life stories of transgenders like Manobi Bandyopadhyay, Laxmi Tripathi, Revathi, to name a few, has carved an abyss of brutality levied upon them through transprejudice. Fictional characters too, whether they surpass the gender dissection or not, are mostly sketched to highlight the pervading prejudice and stereotypes against transgenders. One such character is Shankar Gowda, created by Vasudhendra in his short story entitled *Bed Bug*. Vasudhendra, an Indian writer and a renowned gay activist, has authored thirteen books in Kannada. He has also authored a collection of ten short stories, titled *Mohanaswamy*, published in 2016.

Bed Bug is one of the short stories in this collection, which illustrates the tale of Shankar Gowda, the youngest son of the head of the village. Vasudhendra's metaphorical characterization of Shankar Gowda as 'bed-bug', is a demonstration of a transgender's doomed life, which like the bed bug, is easily crashed down- even to death. Shankar Gowda's voice, gestures, and his body language resonates feminine traits. Furthermore, he likes to play tennicoit with girls, rather than playing football with the boys. He would even draw rangoli designs in his notebook and show interest in designer sarees. Moreover, he would imitate like the prostitutes of his village in front of his friends and they would burst into laughter. In addition, he would repeat this gesture any number of times for the amusements of his friends.

With all the wealth, fame and power his family has, Shankar could have been the prince of his family, added to it his charm and well- built body. Nonetheless, his effeminate characteristics made him the butt of the joke for his entire life. For instance, during one of the biology classes, the teacher was explaining the students that a child is neither born a female nor a male because of some chromosomal mismatch and simultaneously looks at Shankar and smirks. The entire class then, bursts into laughter, thus deriding his sexual preference.

Similarly, Manobi Bandyopdhyay, India's first transgender principal, was subjected to bullying during her school and college days. Moreover, she was seen as a sex toy by several elderly boys in her neighbourhood, where some took her to physically explore her body while there were others who would mock and guffaw at her feminine traits.

At this juncture, it is significant to construe gender performativity, as propounded by Judith Butler- a philosopher and thinker, in the 1998 notable work *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. This concept was further elaborated in her celebrated work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990. Her model on gender performativity is a deconstruction of the prevailing dominant gender norms; that is, it relies upon social construction of gender as well as the compulsory heterosexuality. She states that the performance is a set of repetitive acts that are based on this hegemonic heteronormative conceptualisation. Furthermore, she enunciates that gender does not perform these acts; in fact, it is the performative acts that determine the gender. However, these performances cannot be put to halt altogether; instead, these repetitive acts are kept intact within the individual. In Shankar's case, his gestures, the way he walks, and his body language in an effeminate way is the reflection of his performative acts. In the course of exhibiting it, Shankar is bullied because his performative acts transcend the male- female dichotomy, which is quite not accepted by the straights.

Furthermore, Butler in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, expresses that, "the effect of gender is produced through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 140). From this context, it is significant that, gender is not the central locus and cannot be confined to the male- female binaries. Therefore, as stated earlier, since it is the performative acts which constructs the gender identity, new gender identity is produced with every new performance. As a result, Shankar's identity as a male by birth alone cannot define his gender; rather, it is his performance; that is, his feminine traits which determines his gender identity. His repeated effeminate characteristics creates an 'effect' and thereby, it underscores the fact that his gender identity moves away from the male- female dyad and acquires a different yet visible identity. To put in other words, the 'effect' that is created through his repeated acts, per se, his fascination for rangoli designs, sarees, singing songs with an effeminate voice, generates his 'gendered- self' and the subsequent placing of these performative acts as a representation of his gender identity.

Moreover, the lives of the transgenders become even more miserable when bullying turns into physical abuse. Several transgenders face brutal physical torture by the homophobic society day by day. Little is known about their physical persecution which sprouts from their own family! Shankar too had suffered similar torture at his home. When Shankar returns to school after a short hiatus, the narrator is shocked to see black and blue bruises

all over his body. This has been done by his parents in order to get away with his girlish traits. The narrator says, “but to his ostentatious family, his effeminate behaviour was a bitter pill to swallow. His two brothers, his father, mother and everyone else in his family implored him to change. How could he change something that was natural to him? (Vasudhendra, 181).

This naturalisation of binaries can be clearly witnessed during Shankar’s plight taking its toll; that is, when the narrator, after five years of his visit to his hometown, learns that Shankar committed suicide. He learns from his childhood friend, Kommi that Shankar did not commit suicide, but he was killed! He is struck by horror because he could not believe the fact that his own brothers and father had killed Shankar. Kommi tells him:

You know a bed bug right? It slips into the mattress and bites you all through the night, disturbing your sleep. That son of a bitch was like a bed bug. Just because a bed bug is born in the house people live and grows up there, will they shower love on it? No. if they spot it, they will squish it and wash their hands clean. Thus is exactly what his father and brothers did to him. One day, when he was asleep, they smothered him with a pillow. Then they used his blanket to hang his body, and created a big scene next morning, beating their breasts” (Vasudhendra, 190).

Transprejudice, therefore, is witnessed evidently through honour of the family. Their behaviour brings humiliation to the entire family and in order to preserve their dignity, the members of the family would go to any extent to turn them into gender- conforming beings. Further, it sheds light on “shame culture” of India, as Hoshang Merchant contends in his notable work *Yaarana: Gay writing from South Asia*. This “shame culture” has been one of the obstructions in the comprehension of gender performativity in the Indian cultural context. Having said that, in this case, it is honour killing which dug the grave of Shankar Gowda. One realises how the transgenders are thrust to the periphery of the society because to be a transgender is to disgrace the family.

Thus, Butler’s emphasis on performative acts throws the spotlight on how gender identity becomes a naturalised conceptualisation of the binaries, veiling the very performative act, which actually naturalises the gender. Butler, in her *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, contends that: “...the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within the binary frame” (Butler, 526). In order to comprehend gender performativity, she makes a parallel understanding of the performative acts with that of theatrical acts. In theatrical acts, the actors are aware of what they are performing, but the gender which is performing is not completely aware of its performance. Hence, people like

Shankar Gowda, whose performative acts is not acceptable by the society that is preconditioned by heterosexuality, are easily ostracised. Naturalisation of binaries will only lead to ostracization of the minority community and sometimes even to death like Shankar. Therefore, it is the deed or the very act of performance that stabilises and constructs the gender identity. After all, “genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor deceived” (Butler, 141).

Shankar’s predicaments thus, portray that when the gender is non- conforming, it paves way for transprejudice and its subsequent repudiation. The narrator comes to know that Shankar went to Bombay for his sex change operation, and his return to the village brought shame to his entire family. He was now completely looking like a woman, clad in a sari and a blouse. He returned from Bombay on the day of Ugadi and started dancing with the crowd hysterically. Unable to tolerate his antics, they abstained him from staying in the house. There upon, Shankar protested by asking his property to which his brothers derided by telling that properties are given only to sons, not to daughters. But, his courage was so high that he was reluctant to move away from the house- he slept, bathed and ate there, despite being jeopardized. Also, Shankar had earned money up to a lakh and had made his mother as the nominee. In addition, Shankar, the newly transformed woman, was so beautiful that the men in the village were lured by his beauty and started visiting him, which blew out curses from the women of the village. Moreover, the senior Gowda of the family lost the then election because of his brother’s odd behaviours, accumulating more curses from the villagers.

Henceforth, “his family members hung their heads in shame, unable to face the villagers” (Vasudhendra, 192). With the waning of honour of the family, the members lost their patience and eventually killed him. After Shankar’s death, his brothers urged their mother to withdraw the money that he had earned. Thus, Shankar’s story reflects the precarious lives of transgenders in a country like India, which is deeply rooted in the dignity of the family and the failure of the human kind to construe the gender performativity of the transgenders. The mainstream does not recognize them as part of the society and hence, are subjected to verbal and physical abuses.

This brings us to the vital note that the transgenders are aided and pacified only by people of their own ilk. To quote from Revathi’s autobiography, which substantiates the assistance of the transgenders (pottais) in a helpless state by other transgenders:

For us pottais- whether or not we own things or know people- it is knowing a pottai that counts. Only a pottai knows another’s feelings, pain, loss and anguish. Even when they didn’t know us, didn’t these

pottais come to our assistance? Pottais stand by each other and, believe me, a pottai looking for consolation is sure to find it, and often only in another pottai. We are, in a sense, like a flock of crows. We stick together (Revathi, 82).

Likewise, Laxminarayan Tripathi, one of India's leading transgender activists, faced a similar obstacle when it came to claiming her rights. She was once called for the sixteenth World AIDS International Conference held in Toronto in August, 2006. This was a great achievement for a eunuch, but the obstacle was to obtain a passport in her new identity- a transgender. The only means through which she could get a passport was with a ration card, but, unfortunately, the ration card bore her identity as a male. Things made worse, Laxmi had to undergo a medical test to prove that she was a eunuch so that her identity could be changed in the ration card. Finally, her doctor declared that she was a male by birth, but psychologically and socially she was a woman and obtained a passport.

There have been exceptions like Manobi, Laxminarayan Tripathi, to name a few, who have acquired a better position as transgenders in the society. Manobi became the first transgender principal of India. Laxmi is a renowned transgender activist, rendering her services to the DWS Organization. She has attended several international conferences representing the hijra community as well India. In fact, she is the first transgender to get a certificate of appreciation from a chief minister. But the fact cannot be ignored that they too had undergone tribulations and tortures by the homophobic society and had to toil hard to get the better of it. Revathi, on the other hand, who is a leading activist in India, states in the preface in her autobiography that,

In our society we speak the language of rights loud and often. But do the marginalized really have access to these rights? Individuals are denied their rights in the name of sex, sexuality, caste and religion. They have to either arrive at a compromise or engage in a struggle. I am one such individual who has been marginalised because I was born a male and wanted to live my life as a woman (Revathi, 2010).

PROGRESS IN THE MITIGATION OF TRANSPREJUDICE

Hence, there is a need to create an environment that is gender inclusive. A large number of transgenders are into begging and prostitution because they are either thrown out from the family or ran away from the house to get rid of the derision and brutality.

Things are now slowly changing in the society with the help of the law. The transgenders in India gained their identity as ‘third gender’ in 2014 NALSA judgment (Shahani, xv). This includes the fundamental rights of the transgenders per se education, opportunities in job as well as in health care facilities. In addition to it, the Supreme court also created room for the transgenders to choose the category of female or male despite the third category. Apart from this recognition, the NALSA Judgement also intervened and revamped on what is ‘natural’, a framework in which the law mostly relies on. It firmly asserted that the nature can be decided by the concerning individual themselves. However, the new Transgender Persons (Protection of rights) Act, 2019, makes their certification process mandatory. This meant that the act mandated a sex reassignment surgery if the individual wants to claim himself or herself as a male or a female, thus misconstruing the former law (Menon 2021). Nevertheless, in 2020, the Transgenders Persons (Protection of rights) Act, discarded the mandatory requirement of an SRS.

CONCLUSION

In short, the law alone cannot be the tower of strength for the eunuchs; the society must also shed its prejudices against them. As Butler says in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, “gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 140). Comprehension of gender performativity, thus, helps to mitigate transprejudice. Gender performativity assists in comprehending the self- image, which asserts on the fact that gender does not or should not evolve from the female- male dissection. It is the need of the hour to move away from the stringent dichotomy. Gender performativity will not only help reduce the prevailing transprejudice in the Indian society, but it will also create awareness on transgenders’ lives and literature proves to be one of the best medium. Through literature, let there be light shed upon the ostracized community, which picturizes the predicaments of the transgenders and allows the readers to empathise with them through the fictional tales. These tales in fact, reflect the lived realities of the transgenders in the modern day India. As Revathi (2010) states in the preface to her autobiography “I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work”. Let there be more Manobi, Laxmi and Revathi to empower the community of the transgenders in India. Coexistence, which

is the law of nature, needs to be implemented among humankind and despite the several shades of genders, everyone should have equal role as a participant rather than a spectator.

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