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“Transgender Marginalization and Exclusion”: A Study of Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

Transgender, third gender, (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 boundaries. In every society, they are marginalized and forced to live a life of an “other.” Their education as well as public space is restricted or they themselves choose to live a life of seclusion due to certain limitations. The author will analyse some major Transgender, third gender, (Hijra) characters in the novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and try to locate their alienation within gender specific literary discourse. As we read the novel, we find that these characters are mostly torn between two worlds- male- female, love-hate life-death and so on. They sometimes seek to avoid desire altogether. As language and desire are complementary, their attempts to remake themselves through ‘naming’ and ‘re-naming’ turns out as a heroic but unsuccessful exercise. Such characters either endure the pain of social stratification or 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, ranging from religious doctrines to the social mythical narratives. Since, it is not possible to cover the whole spectrum of their suppression from Adam’s creation to the present time in this research paper, the author will only give a brief account of the plight of Hijra community in India as portrayed in the novel, keeping in mind the key texts related to gender studies in order to explore the problems they face in day-to-day life.

Keywords- *Transgender, Caste, Gender-Inequality, Identity*

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Introduction

Much of the western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other:

Dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women. (Audre Lorde.).

The Asian narratives are not altogether different from western European presuppositions. In our sub-continent these groups are also being thrown out into the abyss of misfortune and suffering. The different class stratification of the society into various racial and ethno-social categories has made the marginalized groups to live a life of dehumanized inferior. Among these groups, my special focus will remain on the transgender (Hijra) characters portrayed in the novel. The aim is to expose the subject of double oppression, “being neither man nor woman” and at the same time belonging to the “inferior race, caste or color” faced by such characters in the novel. As Paul Smith, in his anthology called *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture*, writes:

Biological men - male-sexed beings - are after all, in varying degrees, the bearers of privilege and power within the systems against which women still struggle. The privilege and power are, of course, different for different men, endlessly diversified through the markers of class, nation, race, sexual preference and so on. But I'd deny that there are any men who are entirely outside of the ambit, let's say, of power and privilege in relation to women. In that sense it has to be useful to our thinking to recall that masculinities are not only a function of dominant notions of masculinity and not constituted solely in resistant notions of "other" masculinities. In fact, masculinities exist inevitably in relation to what feminisms have construed as the system of patriarchy and patriarchal relations. (Paul, Smith)

Similarly Leslie Feinberg provides clear illustrations of the dimensions of the bathroom problem in *Stone Butch Blues*. In this narrative of the life of the he-she factory worker, Jess Goldberg, Jess recounts many occasions in which she has to make crucial decisions about whether she can afford to use the women's bathroom.

Again Judith Halberstam's influential critical book, “Female Masculinity” draws our attention to the cultural forms of gender multiplicity and explores manifold formulations gender performance can assume.

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So, keeping in view the above literary-critical works, the author will analyse transgender subjects in the novel, "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness."

Discussion

The term, "transgender" includes all those people whose internally felt sense of core gender identity does not correspond to their assigned sex at birth or in which they were raised. Transgender is in its origin a disjunction between one's feelings of who one is or is not, and how one is or has once been perceived, recognized and understood by others. The experience of being transgender problematizes the relationship of the self to the body, and the self to the others. In doing so, it also problematizes issues of identity boundaries, stability and coherence. (Eleanor Mac Donald)

Thus transgender people are individuals whose identities do not pertain to their biological sex, and hence they differ from the stereotype of how men and women normally are. Their identity and behavior do not adhere to the stereotyped gender norms. They constitute the marginalized section of the society in India, and thus face legal, social as well as economic difficulties. They have restricted access to education, health service and public spaces.

The novel deals with various such characters and explores their plight in the course of their collision with the outside world. The transgender characters in the book include- Kulsoom Bi, Gudiya, Bulbul, (had both been through the formal extremely painful religious castration. Roy, 27), Bismillah (who moved to Khwabgah after her husband, had thrown her out of their home for not bearing him a child. Roy, 21), Razia, Nimmo Gorakhpuri and Anjum. 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.'

The novel mainly follows Anjum, who has a complex gender history. She was born intersex, with both male and female genitals, and in her prime lived with a community of transgender women, as well as Tilo, an illustrator who wanders through the world as a mostly solitary observer.

The novel, mostly deals with those characters who are alienated from one or other way. They struggle in their relations with the family as well as the dominant class they encounter or live in. The book begins with the protagonist of the novel, a Hijra. (Hermaphrodite), named first as Aftab and later Anjum. He/she was first daringly called as

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Aftab, but with the passage of time, when Jahanara Begum, his/her mother, knew the fact, all the happiness of the family changed into gloom. To cure her child suffering from the incurable malady, she took her Dargah to Dargah and hospital to hospital. While as Mulaqat Ali passed on to him his love of 'poetry' and discouraged the singing of 'thumri and chaiti'. He stayed up late into the night, telling Aftab stories about their warrior ancestors and their valour on the battle field." (Roy, 17).

The 'male masculinity' was the only kind of therapy which could cure the family of the ignominy. So, in this way, Aftab in his very young age, with an exceptional talent and love for singing, had to become a hydra headed creature, and to adopt a plethora of guises in order to survive in a world which offers no place to his mixed identity. The anatomy of gender inculcated by socio-religious doctrines from east to west, reduce vast transgender population into a bottomless pits where they neither can live nor can die. Aftab who surpasses all conventional qualities yet have to endure the pain of living a dual creature, a 'dual being' oscillating between hope and despair, forced by the hostile world to surrender all the dreams and live a life of seclusion. Aftab, now, torn into pieces by the hostile social forces asks the Imam "you tell me, where do old birds go to die? Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets? Do you not think that the All-seeing, Almighty one who put us on this earth has made proper arrangements to take us away?" (Roy, 5).

Aftab up to the age of nine, 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).

When the teasing continued and became unbearable, Aftab stopped going to his music classes and refused to go school any more. These incidents which quite often happen to the transgender people stop them from the process of education and basic right to live. For Aftab, the music represents the world outside, a wonderful world, full of possibilities. His songs signify the miracles he can perform, and the teasing from the people, are the restrictions imposed to his creativity by socio-religious dogmatism, pointing fingers at his/her gender.

Aftab, now caught in the male-female conventional boundaries begins to search his real place in the society. One day he saw a tall-slim hipped woman wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green stain salwar kameez, buying bangles from a bangle seller. He keeps a gaze on the woman and is pleased with her appearance. Aftab decided to follow that woman who could dress and walk as she did. "Whatever she was Aftab wanted to be her". (Roy, 18).

This desire kept Aftab searching for the place where he could be accommodated and finally he manages to insinuate into the 'Khwabgah', the house of dreams. This was the only

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place in his world where he felt the air made way for him. (Roy, 19). The next night Aftab was presented with a green Khwabgah dupatta and initiated into the rules and rituals that formally made him a member of Hijra community. (Roy, 25).

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)

The journey and fate of Anjum is similar to the he-she factory worker Jess Goldberg in Leslie Feinberg's novel, *Stone Butch Blues*. In this narrative of the life of the he-she factory worker, Jess Goldberg, Jess recounts many occasions in which she has to make crucial decisions about whether she can afford to use the women's bathroom. On a shopping outing with some drag queens, Jess tells Peaches: "I gotta use the bathroom. God, I wish I could wait, but I can't." Jess takes a deep breath and enters the ladies' room:

Two women were freshening their makeup in front of the mirror. One glanced at the other and finished applying her lipstick. "Is that a man or a woman?" she said to her friend as I passed them. The other woman turned to me. "This is the woman's bathroom," she informed me. I nodded. "I know." I locked the stall door behind me. Their laughter cut me to the bone. "You don't really know if that is a man or not," one woman said to the other. "We should call security to make sure." I flushed the toilet and fumbled with my zipper in fear. Maybe it was just an idle threat. Maybe they really would call security. I hurried out of the bathroom as soon as I heard both women leave. We find that both Jess Goldberg as well as Anjum has to endure the pain and suffer the identity crisis. For Jess, the bathroom represents a limit to her ability to move around in the public sphere. Her body, with its needs and physical functions, imposes a limit on her attempts to function normally despite her variant gender presentation. Similarly, Anjum had to sacrifice her singing for the price of being a Hijra. She had to abandon education because social conventions impose a limit on her, to move and think independently.

Anjum lived in the Khwabgah with her patched-together body and her partially realized dreams for more than thirty years. At the age of forty- six, she left the Khwabgah.

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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.

On her first night in the graveyard, Anjum placed her Godrej cupboard and her few belongings near Mulaqat Ali's grave and unrolled her carpet and bedding between Ahlam Baji's and Begum Renata Mumtaz Madam's graves. Not surprisingly, she didn't sleep. Not that anyone in the graveyard troubled her- no Jinns arrived to make her acquaintance, no ghosts threatened a haunting. (Roy, 61)

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.

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)

The character sketch of Anjum is build through the course of sixty years. The novel with its digressions and deep political and historical accounts from partition to the present day, allegorically deals with many of the contemporary issues. In the final chapters Jahanara Begum's son had become her daughter, and the bandicoot was now a bride. But other than that, nothing much had changed. (Roy, 415)

The other female characters in the novel also suffer the most. The residents of Khwabgah, a community of either female or transgender characters become the prey of all those who wanted to feed on them.

Conclusion

As a whole, the novel is a depiction of the constant belief towards self assertion that this world could become really a Khwabgah, accepting all people from different shades and shapes of life. At the end, Anjum's graveyard home comes to function as a secular, multifait, sanctuary protected by will power from the turbulent outside world. The novel offers rich analysis and could be decoded from various critical approaches. It is full of allegory, allusion and irony. The occasional terse phrases with constant use of similes takes the reader into the heart of the matter, to distinguish fact with the fiction. The historical and political details presented with digressions unfold some of the bitter realities that everyone would want to un- learn within few hours of reading.

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