



## GENDERED IDENTITIES OF THE TRANSGENDER: A PSYCHO-SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

*The emergence of queer theory in academia dates back to the 1990s, and its real potential lies in its ability to remain open and flexible to varied discourses and demands. In the gender binary world, the gender queer finds life hard and challenging right from the stage they become aware of their sexual orientations. In their quest to find their real self they confront their own sexuality which leads to certain fears, frustrations, and dilemmas. The life of such individuals is not easy as at every step they face rejection by their own family, friends, and society at large. There have been many stigmas attached to the community because of their non-allegiance to the traditional binary model of society and its norms. The proposed research paper intends to take into consideration the divergent issues, concerns and conflicts such as unacceptance, disillusionment, displacement, loss of sense of belongingness, separation, survival issues, dearth of opportunities with special reference to the notion of identity crisis that characterize the lives of these non-binary people. The paper will also focus on the discrimination and oppression they are subjected to. For this purpose, the following texts have been selected for in-depth analysis: *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, *I am Vidya* (2007) by Living Smile Vidya, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy, *The Parcel* (2016) by Anosh Irani, *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik.*

### Keywords

*Queer, Transgender, Identity, Alienation, etc.*

### Full Article

In the gender binary world, the genderqueer finds life hard and challenging right from the stage they become aware of their sexual orientations. In their quest to find their real self they confront their own sexuality which leads to certain fears, frustrations, and dilemmas. The life of such individuals is not easy as at every step they face rejection by their own family, friends, and society at large. There have been many stigmas attached to the community because of their non-allegiance to the traditional gender binary model of society and its norms.

Indians view the third gender as sexually ambiguous beings. Most transgender people especially the younger ones find it hard to come to terms with their gender preferences as opposite gender roles and expectations are imposed on them. As a result of being an outcast, hijras / transgenders have to face neglect, denial, and trauma everywhere. They are deprived of social amenities, are stricken with ailments and health concerns, denied access to education and participation in any activities of so-called civilized society on the pretext of being non-binary.

Hegemonic patterns which require one to be strictly categorized as male or female comprise the very essence of mainstream society. Hijras / Transgenders are disowned by their own



families. By not adhering to the patterns outlined by the mainstream society they choose/are made to choose to opt-out of the center which strictly belongs to the socially accepted male/ female domain. They join 'gharanas' specially designed to cater to the needs of such people where they are cordially welcomed by the new-found relations. They get a new home where they can openly give vent to their feelings and emotions.

In the present paper an attempt has been made to explore the above-mentioned issues in *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* (2015) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, *I am Vidya* (2007) by Living Smile Vidya, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy, *The Parcel* (2016) by Anosh Irani, *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik.

The emergence of queer theory in academia dates back to the 1990s, and its true potential lies in its ability to remain open and flexible to diverse discourses and demands. Some of the major theorists directly associated with queer philosophy and principles are Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Adrienne Rich, and David Halperin. Michel Foucault, an eminent literary critic, and philosopher has also contributed substantially to the theory. The other theories and disciplines that have directly or indirectly influenced it are psychoanalysis and post-structuralism. Judith Butler's notions of gender identity and performativity hinting at a poststructuralist analysis of gender and Foucault's insistence on establishing a link between sexuality, knowledge, and political power are some of the foundational ideas that inform the tenets of queer theory heavily.

The word 'queer' can be applied to anyone who is abnormal, weird, or someone who does not fit into the matrix of the binary world. If we consider the connotative meaning of the word 'queer', it is not something new but is ancient and has been existing for centuries though it came to the attention of the scholarly world a few decades back. It is not only a simple word but a position that refuses to be a part of mainstream culture with all its norms and behaviours. "Originally queer was a term broadly used to refer to what was odd, strange, abnormal or sick and along these lines employed as a colloquial slur of homosexuality" (McCann & Monaghan 2). People who are 'unapologetically' different and who have sexual orientations other than male/female also identified as queer. Queer theorists like Judith Butler stress the idea of accepting this difference and celebrating sexuality in all its forms by blurring the distinction between gender and sex. The 'Q' in LGBTQ was adopted by the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual community in the late 1980s. They have had a long history of abuse, guilt, and insult which, to some extent, led to their inclusion in the community. Its attempts to distance itself from the approaches of LGBT manifests its 'fluid' and 'performative' aspects of sexuality which led to disagreements as far as the debates regarding the stable identities and coherent self are concerned. "Queer was reclaimed by LGBTQIA+ community as an umbrella term to designate resistant and non-normative sexuality, seemingly unburdened from the separatist strains that had emerged around gay and lesbian identities" (McCann & Monaghan, 2).

Constructedness of gender identity is a complex and multidimensional process. It involves summing up varied perspectives and impressions that lead to a unified whole. The sex of the child forms the basis on which gender is assigned to the child. The child continues to live in that image projected by outer influences. Living close to the ideals considered befitting for a person of particular sex wins the approval of society. Any internal conflicts arising out of the interaction between feelings and emotions are ironically termed as unlawful and the so-called lawful social codes are thrust on the being of an individual which leads to fractured/ fragmented identity. In such a social set-up 'trans identities' find it hard to survive as their transgression of social gender norms pushes them to the periphery excluding them from the mainstream society.

One's identity is what defines one's self. "Identity is who you are" (Stryker, 21). Any confusion or conflict that gets you to question yourself is termed an identity crisis. Identity crisis





is what characterizes the lives of the third gender in particular. Identity crisis is not solely intrinsic to the third gender as every individual at some stage of their life is faced with dilemmas that lead to identity diffusion, particularly in childhood. But for these individuals, this tormenting impasse never seems to get resolved. The confusion over the sex assigned to someone at birth raises doubts about one's gender identity since "each person has a subjective sense of fit (or lack of fit) with a particular gender category" (Stryker, 17). Most of the binary individuals do not feel a sense of discordance or incongruence as far as defining their gender identity is considered. But for transgenders things are different. Transgenders demonstrate that "it is possible to form a sense of oneself to properly belong to another gender category or to resist categorization at all" (Stryker, 17).

The concept of the third gender and their place in society may be relatively new in the western part of the globe but Greece and South Asia have had a rich culture and heritage as far as gender diversions are concerned and history stands testimony to the fact that undivided India was not only tolerant but offered a respectable position to the community of the third gender. Things evolved and took different turns some for good and some for bad. Their descent from God-like status into the most wretched of the earth tells a poignant tale. They were othered even by the ones who themselves are considered 'other' in the patriarchal world.

There has been a drastic shift in the perspective of society concerning the hijras / transgenders community from being envisaged as a semi-divine being to the sub-human status accorded to them in the present. Their resorting for begging and prostitution for sustenance hint at the sorry state of affairs in the Indian society and cast doubts on the democratic structure of the country.

Anosh Irani, an Indo-Canadian novelist, and playwright was born and brought up in Bombay. Nominated for many prestigious awards he has several plays, novels, and short stories to his credit. The issues presented in Anosh Irani's *The Parcel* are traumatic childhood, prostitution, human trafficking, familial ties, adverse effects of the property boom, etc. Set in Kamathipura 'a destitute, violent, and thriving district' the novel explores the issues of transgenderism through the character of Madhu, an aging eunuch. Madhu was born a boy but disowned by his parents for being too feminine he chose to live his life as a eunuch. As Judith Butler in an interview with Christian Williams affirms 'one should be free to determine the course of one's gendered life', Madhu embarks on the new world of freedom and possibilities. But, unfortunately, is welcomed by disillusionment only. She soon gets lost in the quagmire of inhumanity to the extent that she could not see the evil in her action. The novel seems to suggest that it is not only physical violence that tears you apart but mental and emotional torment can be equally destructive. Madhu is eventually absolved of her guilt as the 'parcel' returns home unopened. Resisting the didactic tone the narrative keeps it matter-of-fact. The novel also hints at the fact that sometimes in the pursuit of real identity one has to sever the familial ties but the anticipation to get reunited with the family remains ever strong in the heart.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi was born as the eldest son of the conventional Brahmin family on 13th December 1978 in Mumbai. She is a 'Bharatnatyam' dancer, a human rights activist, Bollywood actress, and the first transgender person to represent Asia Pacific in the UN in 2008. She is an active spokesperson for the transgender movement and has raised transgender concerns globally. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* presents an earnest and sagacious memoir of transgender Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. The autobiography was originally written in Marathi and later translated into English. Laxmi draws on her own terrible and despicable experiences and emerges as a phenomenal catalyst of transformation for her community and nation. As a principal text of queer literature, the narrative unveils the three phases of transgender identity: child sexual abuse, societal exclusion, and struggle to locate a social space. It begins with a description of Laxmi's



childhood, and she was affectionately called Raju by family and friends. However, Raju discerned a feminine side to his identity, which he could not comprehend and explicate to his family. At a family gathering, he suffered the trauma of sexual abuse as he faced molestation at the hands of a relative and his friends. The repeated sexual assaults forced him to lead a secluded life, but the affliction of being a social deviant brought forth a repulsive transformation in him, and he ventured to discern his true identity. The journey from the eldest son of the family (Raju) to a female hijra (Laxmi) causes severe agony, however with all the tangible subjugations from the society, Raju/Laxmi emerges victorious and lives his/her life with dignity. Despite being at the margins, Laxmi has been successful in making her voice heard both at the national and international levels.

A Revathi is a Bengaluru-based writer and activist. She is a trans-woman working for the rights of sexual minorities. In her memoir, *The Truth About Me* by A. Revathi gives a harrowing account of the struggles and subjugation a person of non-heteronormative tendencies has to go through. It is a candid account of the daily travails of Doraiswamy whose journey from being the dearest son of his parents to becoming a hijra and sexual minorities activist is no less eventful. The narrative seems to suggest that hegemonic heteronormative discourse plays a pivotal role in colonizing the targeted subjects by setting the limitations and certain codes that completely restrict the growth of a person who is striving to evolve into a better version of themselves. In such circumstances, it is undaunted courage, the spirit to realize your true self, an urge to be recognized as a human being that gives one's life a purpose to move ahead and helps one steer clear of all odds and hurdles. The narrative is a critique of the prevailing stereotypic culture, bureaucratic state, and fallacious policies it endorses in the name of justice. The author through her narrative breaks the silence gets the message across that though they are marginalized in every respect they are not the passive recipients of all the filth and dirt society has to throw.

Arundhati Roy is an Indian author, political activist, best known for her novel *The God of Small Things* which won her the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 1997. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is her second novel published twenty years after her debut. The narrative puts forward vital social and political issues – land reforms that deprived poor farmers of their lands, the 2002 Godhra train riots, the Kashmir insurgency, and the predicament of the transgender community in Indian society. The novel presents the throbbing tale of Anjum, the transgender, who strives hard to discover her identity in the metropolitan city of Delhi. Anjum's siblings joined school but she stayed at home and shattered all social relations. Due to the distress and trauma of loneliness, she sought a new life outside of the normative group. Roy foregrounds the idea that despite the constitutional amendments, the transgender community has to undergo innumerable tribulations in every stratum of the social order, and their endeavors to assimilate into mainstream society are not acknowledged. The social seclusion further widens the biological differences of male, female, and transgender and puts the existence of the transgender identity at stake. The novel also explores the future possibilities for this community of 'subalterns'. Roy does not provide any solutions to the issues and problems highlighted in the narrative, she only raises the concerns and leaves them for the readers to ponder over it.

Living Smile Vidya was born in Andhra Pradesh but later migrated to Chennai. She is a writer, an actor, and an assistant director. Born a boy, the privileged gender in India she was more educated than her sisters. Being a 'dalit' and a trans woman she was subjected to oppression and bigotry at multiple levels. Vidya's autobiography *I am Vidya* reveals traumatic journey and dilemmas that the transgender community undergoes when they are unable to accept dictates of the conventional society. Vidya was born as a boy and was the sixth child of her parents. Being the only son, the family had numerous expectations from Vidya, and he was considered a privileged member of the family. However, the constant pain of being in a male's body created a





void in her mind and soul. The desire to carve her niche surpasses all other social commitments. “I was in search of myself, going beyond my confusion over my gender” (Vidya, 49). In her autobiography, Vidya has unfolded the bitter truth of how family and society are unable to understand the predicament of the transgender community. When they fail to cope up with problematic and critical circumstances, the only path left for them is suicide. Recognition is a vital human need, and misrecognition can inflict serious harm. The proposed research project will study the plight of the transgender community who endure unflinching agony to attain recognition and ultimate peace. With resilience, determination, and hard work, they can unshackle societal conventions and make their voice heard.

Devdutt Pattanaik is an Indian mythologist, author chiefly known for his writing on the relevance of mythology in contemporary times. His works' major focus is on religion, management, and leadership. He has written more than fifty books. Pattanaik has applied gender theory to Indian mythology making it unique in its appeal. The relevance of *The Pregnant King* increases manifold when analyzed in a mythological context as it throws ample light on the existence, lineage, status, and many other aspects of the life of the third gender. The author through his work attempts to redefine gender identities by softening and blurring the lines between them. There are several references to mythological genderqueer characters like Brihannada, Shikhandi, etc. it highlights the dilemmas and conflicts between duties, responsibilities, and desires. The novel *Pregnant King* reimagines the gender and psychological issues that are central to the better understanding of varied gender identities. Yuvanshva, the pregnant king of the title mistakenly consumes the potion prepared for his wife by sages, thus accidentally becomes pregnant. The novel seems to hint at the 'slippery nature of gender identities which do not seem to fit in the traditional molds of male, female, and other. The questions regarding the superiority of man or woman keep troubling him till he finds the answers in the image of Lord Shiva representing half man half woman.

Transgenders are struggling hard to find a voice. If considered under the rubric of third gender theories the issues and concerns of third gender categories across the world appear universal in appeal but there are certain situations and problems which are specific to the hijras / transgenders of India.

To sum up, a study of the selected works reveals the divergent issues, concerns, and conflicts such as unacceptance, disillusionment, displacement, loss of sense of belongingness, separation, survival issues, and dearth of opportunities with special reference to the notion of identity crisis that characterizes the lives of these non-binary people. The study has also highlighted the discrimination and oppression they are subjected to. The operation of hierarchy, power play, and their quest to carve out a niche for themselves in the hostile world are some of the other vital issues that have been discussed in the selected texts.

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