



## AN INTERSECTIONAL READING OF SANTA KHURAI'S *THE YELLOW SPARROW*

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### Abstract

*While transgenders have grown as individuals and contributors in modern Manipuri society, the lack of education and awareness limited transgender life throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This paper employs Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to examine Santa Khurai's memoir, The Yellow Sparrow, and the complex interaction of gender identity/roles, societal expectations, class, moral policing, and the lack of transgender support. The paper delves into an exploration of Santa Khurai's experiences that are shaped by being transgender, socioeconomic background, and the limited opportunities that were available to her. The paper examines transgender acceptance and adherence to social norms within the Meitei community. This paper uses Khurai's own experiences to highlight transgender people's loneliness and vulnerability. It also underscores the importance of developing a compassionate understanding of transgender people. Through an intersectional framework, the study seeks to enhance our understanding of transgender individuals and promote a society that is inclusive and fair.*

### Keywords

*Homo, Transgenders, Gender, Intersectionality, Marginalization, etc.*

### Full Article

The generic term used for referring transgenders in Manipur is rather demeaning, "Homo." The term "Homo" is "used for all effeminate men and boys- anyone whose mannerisms were like a woman's, or even men who were controlled by their wives" (Khurai, 9). Homo (in a condescending manner) is also used to describe artists who take up female roles in the widely popular Shumang Leela of Manipur. Rubani Yumkhaibam writes, "Shumang Leela and nupisabiartists are also held as crucial sites for popularising gender variant male identity through theatrical transgending" (Yumkhaibam, 93). While it is widely common for the appropriation of female roles by transgenders, male artists who often maintain the pose and persona of an effeminate man, who embodies a more fluid expression of masculinity, take up these roles as well. These men who continue to preserve their locks of hair long, slim bodies and often softer features of their eyebrows are also termed "Homos." The common mislabelling of transgenders and effeminate men as "Homos" is merely a misunderstanding caused by a limitation of language and a narrowing understanding of gender and identities. While these effeminate artists have heterosexual relationships and build families, most of the transgender artists unfortunately do not. Transgenders in Manipur have primarily occupied the beauty sector for a long time. Their associations with Shumang Leela and other stage performances have granted them a way of life throughout the late twentieth century. The lack of social awareness, stereotypes, and stigmas has created mainly a scarce and harsh environment for transgenders to live and grow in. Cultural and societal attitudes and fear of judgment have caused transgenders from owning their genders and identities. Family, communities, and societies have often shunned transgenders for their way of life. This fear has also led to them not coming out to their families and forcefully committing themselves to unhappy relationships. However, contemporary Manipuri society has shown a positive attitude towards acknowledgment of transgenders and their contributions to the society. Transgender individuals have secured a significant presence and influence within the beauty and wellness, health



and service, and arts and culture sectors. The growth of the transgender community and their empowerment, thus noticed, likely had stemmed from several factors which may include awareness, education, and unwavering advocacy for social justice. Education and awareness, further acts as factors for empowerment and acknowledgement, not only for transgenders but for the heteronormative society that is in Manipur.

Santa Khurai is a well-known transgender rights activist, artist, and writer from Manipur. She is secretary of the All Manipur NupiMaanbi Association (AMaNA), a non-government organization working for the rights of transgenders in Manipur, primarily and other northeastern states. Khurai's memoir *The Yellow Sparrow* talks about her life as a young child struggling to find her true self. Born as a male, Khurai struggled with coming out to her parents until she discovered people who behaved like her. The memoir discusses Khurai's life as a transgender, battling parental and societal expectations, juggling between jobs, relationships, drug abuse, and finding her purpose. The memoir uncovers incidences of life in the eighties and nineties, mainly when gender awareness was at a low, and transgenders were recognized as "homos," a derogatory term used to define them.

At the center of examining this memoir through crossroads is employing Kimberle Crenshaw's "theory of intersectionality." Crenshaw's theory has been considered a seminal framework for examining and exploring the multiple forms of disadvantages, obstacles, or particular forms of oppression and discrimination that continue to affect and condition people's lives. Crenshaw posits the idea that marginalized or underprivileged groups, more than others, experience forms of oppression and discrimination based on their race, sex, caste, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Intersectionality asserts that these factors that cause oppression or disadvantages depend on or correspond with one another in creating unique experiences. Thus, these multiple factors dictate how severe or minor the oppression or disadvantages are.

By employing an intersectional approach, this paper aims to explore trans-rights activist Santa Khurai's memoir, *The Yellow Sparrow*, and examine the reciprocity of gender identity, societal expectations, class, moral policing, and the overall lack of support systems for transgender individuals in Manipur. The paper looks into an exploration of Santa Khurai's experiences that are not only shaped by being transgender but also by her socioeconomic background and the limited opportunities that were available to her. The paper examines transgender acceptance and adherence to social norms within the Meitei community. By centering on Khurai's lived experiences, her becoming as a trans-woman, this paper will uncover the isolated and vulnerable lives of transgenders and cultivate the greater need for an empathetic understanding of trans-individuals.

The visibility and freedom available to the subjects in Manipur today is discernible in the appraisals of those nupimaanbis who came of age in the 1980s. Their observations on the past and the present are usually expressed in the form of memories and remembrances of the invisible nupimaanbi space in the decades prior to the mid-1990s (Yumkhaibam, 162).

While transgenders in contemporary Manipuri society enjoy a rather considerate environment, transgenders like Khurai and her contemporaries grew up in a less accepting past. Khurai's adverse life story is found at the intersection of various categories such as gender, family, sexual orientation, class, and culture, where her self-defining as a "woman" came at a disadvantage. Her identification as a woman caused her great misfortune when certain vigilantes caused her great trouble by beating her up black and blue. Khurai recalls her horrid encounter with a group of men who violently attacked her on the pretext of curing her. The terrorizing encounter included assaults and abuse where the vigilantes claimed they were meant to "punish and educate people like you" (Khurai, 96). Judith Butler writes, "Discrete genders are part of what humanizes individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (Butler, 178). Khurai states that she was forced to say, "I am a man, and I can fuck women" (Khurai, 96). Butler's statement is a testament that



reflects how normativity is deeply ingrained in society, so much that gender has become associated with our biological and physical forms, that gender cannot be “performative” (Butler), in a transphobic society. Punishing as a method of obedience and discipline, through compulsion and harassment, in Khurai’s case, is a reminder of the self-governed bodies that function as moral polices, of a profoundly patriarchal society that believes in sticking to norms and rebellions. Such is a common practice in Manipur, with vigilante justice and insurgent groups, functioning to protect the sanctity of Manipuri culture, customs, and traditions. Vigilante justice, particularly in the context of gender identity, encourages binary gender roles, where any aberrations are met with hostility. Forms of aggression and hostility have changed with growing trends in academics, politics, and social media.

The forced declaration on Khurai’s part, “I am a man, and I can fuck women”, illustrates the lengths to which individuals may be compelled to go to assert their identity in the face of violence. The idea of masculinity enforced by the attackers is purely based on performance. Thus, highlighting the performative aspect of gender that Butler discusses. At this moment, Khurai is forced to perform a version of masculinity that is not her own, emphasizing the performative nature of gender as a social construct rather than an inherent quality.

Khurai’s introductory poem is more or less an illustration of the contents of his memoir. The poem vividly describes a perturbed mother sparrow and a perplexed young sparrow. The poem depicts a conflict between the mother sparrow and the hatchling, where the mother sparrow extensively and excessively conceals the latter from the world for being different. The scenario presented is that of a trapped bird without knowing the circumstances. Khurai writes, “What defect of nature or accident/ Has caged me inside the nest?” (Khurai, 2). Themes of turmoil, indifference, seclusion, approval, and rejection, are set in the poem. Khurai’s quest for self-discovery with the sparrow’s protest against the mother sparrow plucking out its yellow feathers. The next passage from the poem presents a conflict between the two. The lines read,

“Your innocent body is spewing a host of yellow feathers, incessantly, alarmingly, your yellow feathers are spreading all over your body till the corner of your eyes” (3).

These lines heavily symbolize the significance and roles of mothers in Manipuri society. Mothers are most often blamed and stigmatized for bearing such disorderly children. Such circumstances frequently create an unfavorable scenario regarding how families and children fit into traditional or patriarchal societies. Inevitably, the sparrow learns to love itself and shines with its yellow sparrow, freeing itself from the shackles created by its mother.

In the preface to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler calls for an inclusive analysis of gender, to look beyond gender as “an exclusive category of analysis” (xvi). Butler’s dynamic on examining gender and its constitution as an inclusive category directs positivity on an intersectional approach to gender. The dialogue surrounding gender identity dictates that gender and gender transformation often is observed from the surface, on how they represent themselves. Observing and understanding gender identity is about differentiating sexual orientation from gender expression. These elements-orientation, presentation, and experience- often come with identifying the gender, but it is not limited or fixed.

Khurai, thus, observed three men at a local event, where she encountered them, and further peaked her curiosity about her own gender identity. Khurai observed the three men’s character, style, gestures, and elocution, which sparked curiosity. On the surface, they appeared like men, but they behaved like women. This encounter renewed her interest, and her association with the term ‘Homo’ grew. Khurai was met with fear and worried at the thought of being discovered conversing with ‘Homos.’ Khurai attempts to define being ‘homo’ as someone undeserving of love, respect, and sympathy, a mere object for distraction and entertainment based on his experiences. Khurai reflects on fundamental complexities surrounding being a ‘homo’ and identity based on the general perception of transgenders in Manipuri society. Khurai projects her deepest thoughts and raises questions:

Homo, who are you? How did you begin your journey? What are your faults? What makes you abominable in the eyes of the world? Everyone



looks upon you as a showpiece, a circus item. Many exploit and throw you away without the slightest remorse (Khurai, 15).

In a traditional and conservative society, the faults often lie with those who do not adhere to the norms and customs. As a result, transgenders have been subject to objectification and are treated as beings that are vulgar, detestable, and obscene. Many transgenders have been subject to stereotypes such as drug abuse, AIDs, HIV, and debauchery. Khurai's own experience with drug abuse following her failure in life, relationships, and career is mentioned in the book. Khurai writes, in addition to SP tablets, I had become a heavy drinker. My worsening drug addiction was followed by a proportionate decline in my parlor business (Khurai, 250).

Drug abuse, primarily the use of SP tablets (Sulfadoxine Pyrimethamine), was a common trend in Manipur at the time. Many youths of the time indulged in it. For transgenders, resorting to drug abuse could be primarily due to the limitations thrust upon them. Many transgenders in the state, particularly during the eighties and nineties, were uneducated and thereby made prone to such indulgence. Khurai further mentions that rumors of her being infected with AIDS were circulated. Her association with drugs and deterioration of health further displaced her from being a top name in the fashion/ film and makeup industry. Stereotyping, labelling, and stigmatization gradually elevated Khurai's dismissal from her associations with her suppliers and customers.

The disadvantages, rejection, and discrimination encountered by transgenders in the employment sector are highlighted in yet another event Khurai encountered. Khurai expresses her experience, "The rejection was not based on competency or incompetency. It was based on my appearance" (Khurai, 154). Thus, her appearance and her projection of her gender identity became a factor of disadvantage. It is also a reflection of deeply ingrained prejudices and fears among heteronormative people of the time. A general lack of awareness and misconception that transgenders could be educated as well as efficient was absent. This ideology also discouraged the existence of an inclusive environment that could incorporate transgenders into an employable space, one where they share spaces such as in offices or in any field of work.

Transgenders in general retain a lack of education, and that has been a cause for their backwardness and lack of awareness in society. Further intensifying their marginalization and isolation, is having socio-economic disadvantage owing to their positions as backwards in the social structure. Most transgenders come from below-par families or are disowned and left to fend for themselves. Yumkhaibam states that "lack of sympathy among peers in school and poverty" to be some of the main reasons for transgender drop outs and failure to attend a degree (Yumkhaibam, 214). Such an intersection of multiple disadvantages further reinforces negative stereotypes that affect their social well-being. Khurai admits that her education gave her the confidence to be bold and set the right path to owning her identity. The importance of education is emphasized when Khurai writes of the praise she received, "...even though Santa is a homo, he is brilliant in studies; one should admire him for that" (Khurai, 45). Thus, the circumstances indicate that a trivial but indispensable element, like education, can be a factor for empowerment in the transgender community.

The systemic barriers, such as the lack of education, are not random but rather due to prejudice and discrimination within educational institutions that result in hostile, unwelcoming environments leading to transgenders dropping out of school—likewise, a source of workplace harassment in other sectors. Khurai recalls that she had been called "homo at school" (Khurai, 10) and that it made her "feel angry and ashamed" (Khurai, 10).

Despite society's prejudice and rejection of transgenders, Khurai's encounter with other transgenders reveals that the transgenders of Manipur consciously form a close-knit community. As a marginalized and disadvantaged group within a much larger community, the solidarity of transgenders mirrors unity as a response to the external pressures and biases they face. One significant figure in Santa Khurai's life is Romen, a distant relative, who Khurai figures are also a "homo like I am" (Khurai, 11). The use of the term 'homo,' while it is derogatory, takes on a different implication when





used by a transgender. The term is a form of endearment and solidarity that reflects a sense of mutual struggles and resilience.

Gender identity and sexual orientation intersect to form yet another factor for manipulation. Transgenders do not conform to conventional heterosexual relationships and often look for partnership or companionship with same-sex (males). They struggle to find friendship and love and are usually at the receiving end of exploitation. Khurai recalls her exchange with Romen, where the latter assures that “a homo’s love never bears fruit” (Khurai, 31). Romen further declares that “they will exploit, manipulate us, and then ultimately marry a woman” (Khurai, 31). The challenges for transgenders are manifold as they navigate between confronting acceptance and rejection, awareness and prejudice, and the idea of heteronormativity that people should only abide by the traditional norms. Creating dismay for transgenders in the quest for relationships, either within a family or private, is transphobia. The fear and disgust towards transgenders often lead to stigmatization and marginalization within spaces that could give them solidarity and strength. Societal beliefs or connotations in the context of Manipur, such as the term “Shamarak Ngamarak (in between fish and animal)” (Khurai, 21), used to describe transgenders, reveals a problematic logic that potentially hinders placement in society. By describing transgenders as something between an animal and a fish, a deeply dehumanizing label is placed upon them as a body that exists outside of the human experience. Incidentally, an “othering” of the transgender is created and is excluded from the functioning of a heteronormative society. Khurai writes, “We could not meet at any public place of our choosing; we were constantly censored in the eyes of the world. Whenever people saw us together, they called us inauspicious or exclaimed, ‘homos, just die.’ Such cruel words caged us and restricted our movements” (Khurai, 58).

Society not only discriminated transgender based on their appearance but also limited their rights to move freely as an independent being. The passage above paints the truths surrounding stigmatization and homophobia, thus creating an intersectional vertex, where “constant censorship” is met with constant disgust. Khurai reminds us through phrases like ‘homos, just die’, the pervasive nature of verbal abuse, power, and trauma.

Khurai’s life eventually improved, and in 2010, she began engaging in humanitarian activities. Her tryst with Human Rights Activist Babloo Loitongbam opened doors toward her calling. She became the All Manipur NupiMaanbi Association (AMaNA)’s secretary and worked closely with SAATHII (Solidarity and Action Against HIV Infection in India). Khurai’s determination to prove her womanhood continues. She claims, “We are unlike the Nupi Sabis who act the role of women in leelas” (Khurai, 257). Her mission is to educate society on the difference between ‘Nupi Sabis’ and ‘NupiMaanbis,’ where the latter ‘need to be recognized as a different category of women’ (Khurai, 257).

### **Conclusion:**

Khurai’s *The Yellow Sparrow* is a narrative that recounts and reveals the intricacies of survival in a homophobic, conservative, and slowly progressing Manipur. Her narrative reveals the complex intersectionality of several factors- gender, identity, social norms, education, and, class in a patriarchal society. Owing to the intersectional disadvantages of their gender and patriarchy, transgenders have faced a lack of education primarily, societal rejection, and exclusion from public spaces. Discrimination towards transgenders in the employment sector, regardless of their education or experiences, further causes marginalization and limits their earning potential. It extends to stereotyping transgenders being forcefully pushed into the beauty-parlor industry, where they are generally favored at.

The systemic discrimination against transgenders also creates opportunities for exploitation and manipulation by potential people who seek their company. Various circumstances of exploitation and discrimination factor into generating self-esteem issues that lead to drug abuse and other forms of misconduct.



By employing Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, multiple forms of oppression based on gender identity, sexual orientation, and other factors could be observed to form a unique set of experiences on how it marginalizes transgenders in Manipuri society. Nonetheless, advocacy, resilience, and community solidarity put a glimmer of hope against the challenges imposed on them.

Owing to awareness of transgender issues and rights, the acceptance of transgenders in contemporary Manipuri society has grown. To further the cause of transgenders achieving equity, education, and empathy are crucial components in decimating prejudices that still afflict the transgender community in the region.

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**Article Received:** 06/05/2025

**Article Accepted:** 19/05/2025

**Published Online:** 25/06/2025



*To Cite the Article: Ngangom, Miranda. “An Intersectional Reading of Santa Khurai’s The Yellow Sparrow” Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism, Vol.- VI, Issue-1, June, 2025, 66-72.*

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