

Societal Exclusion of the Transgender Community in India

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Abstract

The word ‘transgender’ refers to people who are not conforming to their gender at birth. It comprises of both male who transgress their gender to female (MTF) and female who transgress their gender to male (FTM). The term also includes transsexual people, multi-gendered and gender nonconforming people. All sorts of transgender population exist in all societies and cultures from time immemorial to the present day. But these people face injustice, hatred, inequality, exclusion, intolerance, assault, irritation, harassment, cruelty, maltreatment and oppression both in their home as well as in the society. Even though this community exists from antiquity, not even population studies are carried on them by the human society. Awareness is being created among parents and public to educate themselves about transgender issues. The term ‘Third gender’ gives them some sort of approval in the society and media is also bringing to light the transgender people who have acclaimed some sort of status in the society. Of the two strands of Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, one concentrates on the Kashmir issue – the everlasting tussle between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and the other delves on the lives of the transgender community. This paper is an attempt to understand the societal exclusion of the transgender community and the traumatic experiences of a Muslim mother when she delivers a multi-gendered baby with reference to the mentioned novel. Like many transgender people, Aftab too faces teasing from other children in the society. The pressure encountered by him from all walks of life makes him quit his home and take refuge in a graveyard and finally providing shelter to the next generation of transgender people. Aftab who transforms as Anjum becomes anxious about the future of her next generation and begins to live in a graveyard and like a tree she shelters the next generation *hijras* like Saeeda, giving them peace of mind which the turbulent outside world does not give them.

Key words: Birth, Society, Transgender and Trauma.

The American Psychological Association defines the term transgender as “persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth” <<https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/transgender-people-gender-identity-gender-expression>>. It is an umbrella term which refers to people who are not conforming to their gender at birth. It comprises of both male who transgress their gender to female (MTF) and female who transgress their gender to male (FTM). The term also includes transsexual people, multi-gendered, gender nonconforming and third gender people. All sorts of transgender population exist in all societies and cultures from time immemorial to the present day. But these people face injustice, hatred, inequality, exclusion, intolerance, assault, irritation, harassment, cruelty, maltreatment and oppression both in their home as well as in the society. They also face discrimination in basic requirements like education, shelter, employment, health care and law. Hence they are devoid of academic and social success. Even though this community exists from antiquity, not even population studies are carried on them by the human society. Awareness is being created among parents and public to educate themselves about transgender issues. The term ‘Third gender’ gives them some sort of approval in the society and media is also bringing to light the transgender people who have acclaimed status in the society. This paper attempts to analyze the societal exclusion of the transgender community with special reference to Arundhati Roy’s delineation of the traumatic experiences of a Muslim mother when she delivers a multi-gendered baby.

The 1961 year Kerala born writer cum activist, Arundhati Roy attracted the world with her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) which won the Man Booker Prize in the same year. She is the first non-expatriate Indian author to have won that most prestigious literary award. Since her debut novel, for nearly two decades, she has published many non-fiction works of which *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (2004), *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2010) and *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (2011) are very popular. She is a social activist raising her voice for political activities like Kashmiri separatism, criticism of political leaders and environmental causes like the Sardar Sarovar Project, Narmada Dam and India’s nuclear weaponry. In 2017, she published her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* which takes the readers across the Indian subcontinent which has

myriad classes in the society with different cultures and customs from Kashmir to Kerala and most of the incidents of the novel took place in Delhi and Kashmir. It revolves around two women S. Tilottama, with her relationship with three men – Nagaraj Hariharan, Biplab Dasgupta and Musa Yeswi and Anjum, a transgender woman.

The year 1999 can be called significant for queer studies in India, since two major anthologies – *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* and *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* edited by Hoshand Merchant and Ashwini Sukthankar respectively – were published. In 2000, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings in Indian Literature* edited by Ruth Vanita came out. A plethora of scholarly articles were published on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* but only a few articles related to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are published. Thus, it leads to the research dearth in the studies related the transgender community in particular. Indian women lacked independence in their society and especially in the Muslim society, they lacked vision and speech too. Jahanara Begum is a one such woman whose husband, Mulaqat Ali, a lover of Urdu and Persian poetry, is a doctor of herbal medicine. Like a typical Indian Muslim couple, they anticipate a boy baby. At the very first month of her first pregnancy, the couple expect a boy baby. Even they have gone to the extent of naming the unborn baby as Aftab. But to the dismay of their expectation, their first three children are girls and the couple have been waiting for the happiest day of their life – the day being the birth of their son Aftab.

As a mother, Jahanara Begum explores her much awaited boy baby's tiny body and she discovers that "nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part" (Roy 11). The presence of both the body parts actually terrifies her. The author of *The Cement Garden* has rightly pointed that "Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it's okay to be a boy; for girls it's like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading,..." (Ian McEwan 34). For girls having masculine qualities is advancement. It is easy for a woman to wear a man clothing. But it is burdensome for a man to wear a woman's clothing. Jahanara Begum undergoes a series of shocking reactions when she discovers that her Aftab was an intersex or a multi-gendered baby.

According to Gloria Steinem, "We've begun to raise daughters more like sons... but few have the courage to raise our sons more like daughters" <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/72290-we-ve-begun-to-raise-daughters-more-like-sons-but-few>>. Jahanara Begum is a one such woman. Her first reaction is that she felt a cramp on her heart and she also feels her bones to turn into ash. She then confirms whether she is correct and takes another look of her baby's genitals. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy who was very bold in explicitly treating sex and incest, in this novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, expresses that Jahanara Begum's bowels agitated and how fecal matter discharged from her unknowingly.

As a Muslim Indian mother, Jahanara Begum cannot voice out her opinion regarding her child to her husband. She does not have any awareness of how to accept a transgender baby as well. In such a situation, she contemplates on killing herself and her baby. An abyss between her known world and that of the unknown is experienced by her. According to her, everything except her baby has a gender. She decides not to tell anybody about her baby including her husband. She consoles herself by saying that it isn't a real vagina since its passages are not opened. She comes to a conclusion that it would heal and go somewhere as he grows. She was also hopeful that the Lord Almighty will understand her problem and show mercy upon her.

The traumatic Jahanara Begum somehow maintains the secret gender of her son Aftab for some years. She has been waiting for her son's girl-part to heal. Till then, even after her younger son Saqib born, she does not allow Aftab to stray very far from her. Everyone knows that since she has longed for a son, she is very much attached to him. Identifying Aftab's true singing voice, the couple send him for music class to Ustad Hameed Khan, who teaches Hindustani classical music. Aftab has the capacity of singing for nearly 20 minutes when he is hardly 9 years old. Unfortunately, like many transgender people, he too faces teasing from other children in the society. They at first encourage him to sing songs but later on, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they began teasing by saying, "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 13). It is true that this kind of peer pressure creates adversarial effect on him.

Like most other transgender children, Aftab becomes a drop out of school, when the teasing reaches unbearable for him. The poor woman Jahanara Begum's hopes faded away as there was no sign of healing away of his girl-part. The major problem before her is the important and compulsory Muslim ritual, circumcision for Aftab. Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad was born without the foreskin. Aftab's family faces an emergency to conduct circumcision for him

because his younger brother is also waiting in line. Jahanara Begum tries her level best to postpone it for some time and finally she reveals the truth to her husband.

The couple then decides to seek Dr Ghulam Nabi, a sexologist in Nizamuddin, for medical attention for their son. After examining Aftab, the doctor said “was a rare example of a Hermaphrodite, with both male and female characteristics, though outwardly, the male characteristics appeared to be more dominant” (Roy 15). He also recommends a surgeon who would seal the girl-part by sewing it. But they need money for the surgery and his father seriously started to save money for it. They made the consultation with the surgeon without anybody else’s knowledge. While his sisters and brother attend school everyday, the pathetic Aftab spends his time by sitting on the tiny balcony of his house. Traditionally, boys are discouraged from having interests that are considered feminine. Aftab’s father too encourages him to read masculine poetry and he takes up the project of inculcating manliness in him. But all his efforts go vain. Then one fine day, Aftab decided to walk out of his house and to join his community in the out skirts of the town.

Herrero and Baelo-Allue in their work titled *The Splintered Glass: Facets of Trauma in the Post-Colony and Beyond* state that “individual trauma in literature has become one of the most common ways of expressing and representing collective and by extension cultural and ethnic traumas” (ix). Literary narratives like *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, express the trauma of the transgender community along with the trauma encountered by their family.

The Supreme Court of India on 15th April 2014 delivered a historical judgement in which it admits the rights of the transgender people in India. Mr Tiruchi Siva, the honourable Member of Parliament in Rajya Sabha, introduced the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014 and the Bill was passed on 24th April 2015 in the Rajya Sabha and 26th February 2016 in the Lok Sabha. He introduced the Bill to seek an end to the discrimination faced by the transgender people in India. While many senior Members of the Parliament requested Mr Siva to withdraw the Bill promising future assistance and interest to the transgender community, he refused to withdraw it by arguing that there are about 450,000 transgender people in India, with the right to vote. But unfortunately, this community is facing a lot of injustice in their day-to-day life.

The first step in India that the transgender community is getting recognition is that all the application forms have included the field of ‘Third Gender’ or ‘Neuter Gender’ or ‘Prefer not to say’ besides ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ for the gender column. Nowadays news channels are bringing news about the successful transgender people who crack and crush the shackles of the society. In India, the most important transgender people who became a role model for others in the dark are Sathyasri Sharmila, the first transgender lawyer, Joyita Mondal, the first transgender judge, Prithika Yashini, the first transgender sub-inspector, Mumtaz, the first transgender to contest in an election, Adam Harry the first transgender commercial pilot and Shabi, the first transgender soldier in India. By gaining such attention and recognition through hard work and uphill battle, they will uplift the lives of the thousands of people like them in the society. The socially excluded Aftab transforms as Anjum and becomes anxious about the future of her next generation and begins to live in a graveyard and like a tree she shelters the next generation hijras like Saeeda, giving them peace of mind which the turbulent outside world does not give them.

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