

Anosh Irani's The Parcel: A Study of Ostracization, Exile and Marginalized Sex

Paridhi Chaudhary^{a*}, Dr Shuchi Agrawal^b

^{a*} Research Scholar, Amity Institute Of English Studies And Research, Amity University, Noida

^b Associate Professor, Amity Institute Of English Studies And Research, Amity University, Noida

Abstract

In an effort “to bring the marginalized to the forefront”, on 18th July, 2018, the Sahitya Akademi hosted India's first “Third Gender Poetry Meet”. The event has been seen as an inaugurating a dialogue that had long been pending between the ‘marginalized’ and the ‘mainstream’ as far as gender-representations in the literary world are concerned. (Sankalita) This emphasis on greater equality and acceptance of the third gender opens the door for writers and scholars to pursue previously unexplored avenues. The Parcel by Anosh Irani can be analysed as part of this multicultural and broadened viewpoint on a sex that has long been marginalised in culture, literature, and academia. The aim of this paper is to look at Irani's contribution to the portrayal of trans characters in Indian literature, as well as the different forms of rejection that his hijra protagonist in The Parcel has to deal with.

Keywords: Marginalized, Gender, Inclusion, Ostracized, Trans, Hijra

1. Introduction

Meaning ‘across gender’, transgender as an umbrella term is often used to define myriad gender identities that go against the common understanding of what is called as “heteronormative” by Warner. (Warner, 1991:29) This may include the transsexuals, cross-dressers, butch lesbians, transvestites, drag queens/kings and intersexed people (Cuddon, 2013:735). However, trans identities in India vary greatly from those in the West. Hijras in India describe themselves not only as a gendered community, but also as a socio-historical milieu of history, mythology, and folklore. They have a well-defined kinship system, a well-organized organisational hierarchy, induction ceremonies, and, on rare occasions, their own language. They are known by different names in various parts of the Indian subcontinent: Aruvani, Aravani, Chhakka, Ali, Jogappa, Kinnar or Tirunangai. Collectively they are recognized by the Supreme Court of India as the ‘Third Gender’ (Mahapatra, 2014). The Indian mythologist and writer, Devdutt Pattanaik in one of his books opines:

Scholars and activists who identify Hijras as homosexuals, cross-dressers, transgendered people, eunuch, transvestites, and male-to-female transsexuals often ignore the fact that the Hijra are a well-defined social identification as well as a sexual preference. The most important step in becoming a Hijra is to take the Hijrahood vow and join the Hijra community, which acts almost like a caste with its own internal workings, laws, rituals, and hierarchy. (Pattanaik, 2002:24)

In all sorts of trans interactions, though, acute bigotry and social isolation are apparent. Susan Stryker, in his talk on the marginalisation of transgender research in queer studies, states that queer studies are not only “anti-heteronormative,” they also promote a kind of “homonormativity.” Stryker states that while transgender studies is mainly concerned about the “questions of embodiment and identity”, whereas queer studies often privileges “desire and sexuality” as its primary interest (Stryker 7). Such visible exclusionary tendencies and practices even among the identity theorists, as well as the stereotypical depiction of the different gendered categories in literature and art are now confronted and questioned. In India, the emergence of life-writings by/about the transgender people has also significantly contributed to the evolution and development of their literary representation.

In the chapter, Gender and Sex (Cultural Anthropology), Lumen Learning traces the etymology of the word Hijra to the Arabic root, *hjr*. It means departure or leaving one's tribe. Thus, the suggestions of exile are visible in the very name. Exile is also one of the most prominent and recurrent themes in almost all kinds of queer expressions. Eli Clare's ground-breaking work, *Exile and Pride*, explains the alienation that differently-abled and queer bodies suffer from. He explains how the acceptance from the dyke community cannot take away the sense of exile and the longing he feels for home:

When I say that my house is a dyke in a dyke culture, I'm lying. Rather, home consists of unique wild and ragged beaches, specific trees and berry brambles, the exact meander of the river I grew up near, and the familiar sounds and sights of a dying logging and fishing area. Exile is the most difficult because I have irreversibly lost my home. (Clare, 2015:32)

Madhu, the forty year old hijra protagonist of the book *The Parcel*, faces a similar predicament. Having lived most of her life as a sex-worker, she is now reduced to begging to earn her living. All through the novel her yearning and search for home, kinship and identity directs the course of her actions. "I am indeed a migrant, a wanderer. For almost three decades, I have floated through the city's red-light district like a ghost" she says, describing how exclusion and exile are inevitable aspects of the hijra experience (02). Not only Madhu, Irani's novel tells the tale of the entire group of the socially exiled hijras, prostitutes and the trafficked young girls in the red light district of Kamathipura, near Mumbai. "They were lonely disciples whose destinies were stitched together by the thread of being born different—and what a life they had made, all runaways landing in each other's arms." (46)

As the novel begins, Madhu is ordered by Padma Madam, a fierce and hardened brothel owner, to take charge of a ten year old trafficked girl, Kinjal, and to prepare her mentally for prostitution. In the course of fulfilling this assigned duty, Madhu fights numerous dilemmas in her conscience. She has to manipulate the little girl into believing that there is no one waiting for her outside Kamathipura. She has to convince Kinjal that she could never be accepted by her family even if she's freed and she returns. The irony of Madhu's situation is evident here, as she hasn't been able to convince herself of the same fact that her family isn't going to accept her ever again. She herself has spent her life contemplating the possibility of her return to home and the acceptance by her family.

In a parcel's mind, there was always the pathetic notion that her parents would come looking for her. Madhu too still believed that if she stood on that bridge and spoke to her brother, told him her story, he would remember her. She was disgusted that some part of her still longed for her family. (93)

Madhu also finds some reflection of her own self in the traumatic child. Kinjal reminds her of the ghosts of alienation that had haunted her childhood. Madhu recalls how as a boy in childhood he was rejected by his classmates in school, how nobody befriended him and how they mocked and bullied him. Madhu's resentment is the product of that dismal childhood "when he longed for company or support from the outside world". There was nobody but the company of a stray dog, to whose pungent urine the taste of his later life is compared (54). The use of animal imagery is significant here. It is also found in the earlier sections of the novel, where Madhu says that for the rest of the world, people like her were no better than irritant insects and caged birds (05, 23). Madhu was an outcast in the society consisting well-defined genders of men and women. He was exiled from that gendered human world, left to "grovel" and "make acquaintance with the worms and the weeds" (54). There was no company, no friendship, only rejection and sneers in Madhu's childhood. Even in his family he was considered a disgrace. He had to suffer displacement at his own home, as after the birth of his brother, Madhu did not even have a bed to sleep on and had to move underneath it. Madhu compares Kinjal's sufferings with her own childhood trauma, trying to emulate her father's hard-heartedness in order to control the ten year old.

Madhu had left home in search of freedom and acceptance. However, the belief that she would feel home among the people of her kind soon faded. She was disillusioned, realizing that "she had left home only to fall into the illusion of freedom. The veil had lifted" (158). She could not call the Hijra House a permanent abode for her. The "guru" could easily trade her "chela" with any other hijra of another hijra clan or "gharana". "The sisters she had bonded with had been traded to another guru like cattle" (159). Madhu uses the animal imagery again to suggest how there was never any freedom for them, and how their life was dependent upon the whims and wishes of their gurus, just like domesticated animals.

Hijra House had given her asylum, but it was not her home. She was a patient there, much like Bulbul and the rest of her sisters. Over the years they had stood outside, like clothes on a laundry line, hoping that the wind would take them away, whisk them to a better future. They were delusional. (209)

Further, the sense of displacement is experienced by Madhu even within her own body. The psychosomatic discord is the most prominent reason for the identity crisis that she suffers from. It is to be noted here, that a

significant section of most of the works written on trans subjects can be seen as body narratives, where the trans character often sees the biologically assigned sex organs as “dreadful deformity” and wishes to get rid of them (Benjamin, 2006:46). Madhu had distanced herself from her body, “denied it the care it so desperately needed”, considering it “the enemy” (Irani, 2016:111). She felt “trapped in the wrong body” (139). Thus, Madhu is never feels home even at once, neither in family nor in society and above all, not even in her own body.

Once she is rejected by the mother she had spent years thinking about, the possible home of Madhu's imagination is demolished for ever. In course of the novel, even Gurumai dies. Gurumai was closest to what Madhu could identify as her guardian. After her death there is hardly any kinship left in Madhu's life. There is no one but Gajja, the only man to have genuinely loved and cared for her. She respects him like no one else. Also, it is because of Kinjal, the parcel of the story, that for the first time in years, Madhu dreams of liberating the caged bird that she was. She finds a reflection of her own latent longings and hopes in Kinjal. Thus, it is in Gajja and Kinjal that she finds her family; she finds the completeness and belongingness she had desired her entire life. In and through them Madhu finds her final solace and redemption.

This man was hers. Let him rest, he had earned it. This child too...For ages, Madhu had tried to embrace womanhood, but her desperation made her stumble and she had become a pathetic parody. In this moment, Gajja and the parcel had made her complete...She was with her family. (183)

Irani presents Madhu's journey not only as an oppressed character, but as an individual undergoing psychological development all through the novel. The disappointments and dilemmas are detailed with complete precision to bring out Madhu as an empathetic and thinking human character. She is able to overcome the wrongs the society had inflicted upon her. And finally, she redeems herself of the cruelties she had inflicted upon the parcels out of resentment. In saving Kinjal, Madhu rescues herself. She makes innocence prevail over atrocity. In this context, Madhu can be compared to Khushwant Singh's *Bhagmati* in his semi-historical novel, *Delhi: A Novel*. *Bhagmati* and Madhu are both hijra sex-workers, sacrificing themselves in order to save innocence. But Singh's portrayal is often taken to be problematic and somewhat homophobic in nature. The difference lies in perspective of the two writers. Singh's *Bhagmati* plays a very significant part in the action of the novel, yet she never achieves individuality as a character. Singh and his protagonist vividly describe the sex-appeal of *Bhagmati*, overlooking the aspect that makes her a brave character that she proves to be in the end. In fact, critics have often accused Singh of perpetuating the homophobic notions of the society through *Bhagmati* and the other queer characters in the novel. *Bhagmati* plays a central role in the novel, yet remains in the margins throughout. The achievement of Irani lies in the fact that he has managed to weave his entire tale around a doubly marginalized character: Madhu is not only a hijra, but a hijra sex-worker. In centring the marginalized, Irani has managed to break through the conventionalities of gender, sex and sexuality. His novel can be seen as an attempt to create a space for the alienated and the exiled sex, at least in the Indian literary scene. And it is visible how the trans character has evolved from Khushwant Singh's *Bhagmati* to Anosh Irani's *Madhu*.

Despite the persistent LGBTQ protests against art, film and media culture that produces problematic images of their gender and identity, such issues mostly remain underemphasized. Much might have been said, written and researched upon homosexuality as queerness, but transgender studies still remains the relatively lesser explored domain. In his foreword to A. Revathi's *Our Lives, Our Words*, Gautam Bhan, a famous LGBTQ rights activist writes:

Stories and myths abound...Underneath these stories lies our own need to manage, explain and distance ourselves from visible sexual difference and a gender identity that doesn't fit within easy labels of “male” and “female”. In these stories, hijras have no voices, names, families, or histories. They don't love, they aren't happy or sad, they have no political visions or individual quirks. They are invisible. (Bhan, 2011:viii)

The erstwhile invisible stories are now making themselves visible through the autobiographies by the transgender people and activists. Living Smile Vidya and A. Revathi are the most significant names in such attempts at self-reflection and self-representation. Vidya asserts her demand for inclusion on humanitarian grounds, as she says: “We need to belong, just as the rest of humanity need to belong. What can we do when we do not have a wall to lean on, when we can't find a place to stay?” (Vidya, 2013:131). Anosh Irani attempts to make visible one such story through his fiction. Irani's novel makes him a significant part of the group of writers trying to deconstruct the homophobic and heteronormative representations in art, cinema and society. *The Parcel* can be seen as a part of this movement aiming to mainstream the marginalized and contribute to the evolving representation of the transgenders in literature, culture and the academia.

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