

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal



Volume 7, Issue 7, July 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Heteronormativity and the Marginalization of Third Gender: An Analysis of Arundhati Roy's

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Abstract

Indian society seems to be highly patriarchal which is expected to cherish heteronormativity, i.e. the assumption that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation or the sexual and marital relations are happened to be with people of two opposite sexes. This heteronormativity believes only on the binary construction of gender identity, either masculinity or femininity and propels the non-heterosexual gender identities to the margin tagging them as unnatural, abnormal, deviant, queer, sick and so on. The Queer Theory questions the heterosexual framework and gives space to those whose identities and behaviours do not adhere to their biological sexes. Although Indian government legally acknowledges the Third Gender (the category of LGBT) which may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or gender queer but in the practical sense, they are yet far away to be accepted as “normal” human being by the society. Arundhati Roy's long-awaited second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) brings the issue of Third Gender by depicting a transgender character named Anjum who was born as a hermaphrodite. After being humiliated, ridiculed and suffered a great deal in the family as well in social spheres, ze¹

¹ Gender neutral pronoun for he/she.

eventually joins the old Delhi *hijra* community. The novel portrays a realistic picture of the plight of *hijra* community and the negative attitude of the mainstream society towards the peoples who do not conform to the stereotypical gender norms. The present study will explore the politics of heteronormativity in marginalizing the non-heterosexual (Third Gender) gender identities.

Key Words: Heteronormativity, Heterosexual, Marginalization, LGBT, Queer, *Hijra*, Gender, Performativity.

“Those who fail to approximate the norms are condemned to a death within life.”

-Judith Butler, Preface, *Gender Trouble*

If one does not function according to the dominant heterosexual framework, s/he is perhaps to lose something of one's sense in gender. Indian society seems to be highly patriarchal which is expected to follow heteronormativity. The concept of heteronormativity refers to an interdependence of gender and sexuality which defines gender as a binary construction and naturalizes the assumption that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation or the sexual and marital relations are happened to be with people of two opposite sexes. This heteronormativity constantly pushes the non-heterosexual gender identities (which fall under the category of LGBT) to the marginal position, making them “deviant” or “unnatural”. The term was first used by Michael Warner in the introduction to a special edition of the journal *Social Text* (1991) titled “Fear of a Queer Planet”. Arundhati Roy's long-awaited novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) brings the issue of gender identity to the fore by presenting a transgender character named Anjum, her plight of life and survival after entering into the *Hijra* community. The novel questions the heterosexual norms of gender identity by depicting the marginal position of the *Hijra* community in the Indian society.

This study seeks to study how the ideals of heteronormativity leads to the marginalization of Third Gender as depicted in the novel. The emphasis will be given on the transgendered character named Anjum and her plight of being a *hijra* and how ze survives through all the calamities. Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, influenced by deconstructive thought, embodies a postmodern view of gender in her highly acclaimed study, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) that gender is a kind of improvised performance played by individuals. By arguing that gender is a performance, Butler suggests that gender is neither a fixed category nor the casual result of sex. Postmodern views of gender thus reject essentialisms, stable identities and meanings. According to Butler, gender identity is not a manifestation of intrinsic essence but rather the product of actions and behavior, i.e. performance. Butler's *Gender Trouble* poses question to the limits and propriety of gender to the set notion of masculinity and femininity, opening up possibilities to the non-heterosexual gender identities. Transgendered people are individuals whose gender identities do not pertain to their biological sex. They differ from the stereotypes of how men and women normally are. Thus, transgendered people encompass those whose identity and behavior do not adhere to the stereotypical gender norms. They may be gay, lesbian, transsexual or gender queer. They formed the LGBT community. They are treated by the society as "unnatural" and generally become objects of ridicule and fear. "Hijra" is a term used to refer to eunuchs, intersex or transgendered people in South Asia. The word "Hijra" is a Hindi-Urdu word derived from the Semitic Arabic root and the term is translated into English as "eunuch" or "hermaphrodite". The *Hijra* community of India has been a part of the subcontinent for centuries. Many *hijras* live in a well-defined and organized *hijra* communities led by a guru. This community is a testament of sexual diversity that is integral yet forgotten in Indian culture. The *Hijra's* presence is recorded in ancient literature like *Kama Sutra*, a Hindu text on human sexual behavior. There are significant roles

of *Hijra* characters in Indian epics – in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna is depicted as a transgender in the Virata Parva (Section: 44, *Mahabharata*). During Mughal-era in India, *Hijras* had an important position in the Mughal court and administrative system (from the 16th to 19th century). They were also considered to hold religious authority and were sought out for blessings, particularly during religious ceremonies. During colonialism, British authorities criminalized the *Hijra* community through various laws. Since the late 20th century, some *hijra* activists have been working for their right and official recognition that *hijra* as a kind of “third sex” or “third gender”, as neither man nor woman. The Supreme Court of India in April, 2014 recognized *hijra* and transgendered people as a “third gender”. Though the *Hijra* or transgendered community (LGBT) has now been officially recognized as Third Gender, they are still not accepted as “normal” human being by the mainstream society. They are often victims of abuse and discrimination. Violence and hatred against them are very common.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* depicts a story with multiple plots intertwining one another and peopled with characters belonging to the different strata of society; from the upper caste Brahmin to the untouchable Dalit characters, from the aristocratic bureaucrats to the street-dwellers, *Hijras* and so on. The novel begins with the story of Anjum, a transgender *hijra* who has a complex gender history, born with both the male and female genitals which was an exception and almost “unnatural” in the family history of Mulaqat Ali. After the three girl children, Mulaqat Ali and Jahanara Begum were expecting a boy whom they wished to name as Aftab. But as soon as Jahanara Begum discovered that Aftab was a hermaphrodite, she got terrified and for a moment, she contemplated to kill herself and her child. However, she resolved to keep it secret under the fear of heterosexual norm of society where there is no space for a gender queer. Adrienne Rich popularized the term “Compulsory Heterosexuality” in her 1980 essay “Compulsory

Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. In this text, Rich posits that it is enforced by the patriarchal society. Therefore, anyone found differing to the norms of heterosexuality were deemed as “deviant” or “abhorrent”. In order to define the power of heterosexual norm, Rich says in the essay:

The failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness. (Rich 216)

Under the sheer pressure of heteronosexual norm, Jahanara Begum was forced to think that - “was it possible to live outside language?” (Roy 8) as in Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, except the living beings – books, pen, carpet, clothes, etc. had a gender. Everything fell under the category of either masculine or feminine, man or woman. She moaned thinking that Aftab fell in neither of these categories. The only word she knew for those like her baby is – “hijra” or “kinnar”. She also knew that “two words can’t make a language” (Roy 8). Here, we see that even language operates as well as follows the heterosexual politics, the binary of masculine and feminine or male and female. Those who do not fall under the category of heterosexual norm have no space in language. Here Arundhati Roy questions the very structure of language where there is no space for the non-heterosexual gender identities.

In Jahanara Begum’s thinking, we come across a typical heterosexual mentality as she is born and brought up in a traditional patriarchal society where there is no space for a non-heterosexual being. Jahanara Begum desperately wished that Aftab’s girl-part would be healed. She prayed at every shrine she knew and asked the Almighty to show mercy to her baby from being a *hijra*. Mulaqat Ali also left no stone unturned to make his Aftab a boy, a man, the inheritor of his hereditary. He arranged money by every possible way, cutting down

household expenses and borrowing money from the relatives for the medical surgery of Aftab. Simultaneously, he started on the cultural projects of inculcating manliness in Aftab:

He stayed up late into the night, telling Aftab stories about their warrior ancestors and their valour on the battlefield. (Roy 17)

When Aftab heard from his father the story of Changez Khan (Temujin) and how he won the hand of his beautiful wife, Borte Khatun; how she was kidnapped by a rival tribe and how Temujin fought a whole army virtually single-handedly to get her back because of his intense love for his wife, he (Aftab) was more fascinated by the character of Borte Khatun than that of the valour of Changez Khan, and he wanted to be her. It proves wrong the assumption of Mulaqat Ali that “tendencies can always be managed” (Roy 17) because one’s instinctual desire cannot be suppressed forcefully and it is like going against nature. Judith Butler refers to gender as socially-created roles, feelings and behaviours and that are consistent with society’s expectations are considered gender-normative, whereas behaviours that are viewed as incompatible are referred to as gender non-conformity. Here, Mulaqat Ali’s attempts can also be seen as the instance of gender-normative imposed by the patriarchal society. Although Mulaqat Ali is educated and positivistic enough, he cannot come out of the stereotypical gender construction maintained in Indian tradition and culture.

He was very sincere as a student, better than the average students but his real interest was in music. He had a gifted voice and could pick up a tune after hearing it just once. He could sing outstandingly *baba khayal* in Raag Yaman, Durga and Bhairav, Chaiti and Thumri etc. like a Lucknow courtesan. People, at first were amused and encouraging, but soon started snickering and teasing him as follows:

He’s 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 became unbearable, Aftab stopped going to his music classes. Even at school, his classmates made him feel uncomfortable by teasing and taunting so he stopped going to school and confined himself within the four walls of his house. Whenever he went outside people made taunting remarks like “clown without a circus”, “queen without a palace” etc. These are some of the instances of the cruelties and sufferings Aftab had to undergo as he did not conform to society’s strict gender norms. The solitariness and abandonment from the society makes Aftab indifferent to it. In search of freedom and identity, one day Aftab runs away from his home and enters into the world of Khwabgah by joining the community of *hijra*. By transforming himself into a *hijra*, he adopted the name Anjum has been undergone gender surgery removing the male genital part and became a glamorous, affectionate woman. “Khwabgah”, means the house of dreams, is a sort of dormitory for old Delhi *hijra*. There was an Ustad, a guru, called Kulsoom Bi, older than rest of them, who was the head of the Khwabgah. They spend their days applying *surma*, listening to the soundtrack of *Mughal-e-Azam*, talking about good old times, and making profound observation about their destiny and recited Urdu poetry. Despite its chaotic atmosphere, it provided solace and a sense of belongingness to its inhabitants which the “*duniya*” (mainstream society) could never give them. There Anjum meets other *hijras*; Bombay Silk, Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo, Mary, Gudiya among others, with whom she feels intimacy and oneness and finds a space of her own as she expresses in the novel:

It was only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him. When he arrived, it seemed to shift, to slide over, like a school friend making room for him on a classroom bench. (Roy 19)

Thus, the world of Khwabgah stands as alternative space to the *hijras* that the mainstream society does not provide. There is no discrimination on the basis of religion, class, caste, and others. *Hijras* from various religion; Hindu, Muslim, Christian etc. live together there.

The very word *Hijra* is, sometimes, used in a derogatory manner. Most *Hijras* live at the margins of society with very low status. Anjum is told that a *Hijra* is “a living creature that is incapable of happiness...” (Roy 23). Classifying *hijras* or Third Gender people as “unnatural” or “abnormal”, and “deviant”, the patriarchal society validates the heterosexual norm. In the novel, after converting into a *Hijra*, Anjum, at some point of time, feels humiliation as she has to perform, act, dress, using language in a specific way which the society looks at with embarrassment but Ustad Kulsoom Bi empathizes her in such moments saying that there was no reason to be ashamed of anything, because “hijras were chosen people, beloved of the Almighty”:

The word *Hijra*, she said, meant a Body in which a Holy Soul lives. (Roy 27)

Like other people, *Hijras* are also human being with emotions, and desires in life. They also want to live as family; they also want to be a mother, daughter, sister, father, but they cannot as society never ratifies their position. In the novel, we see the misery of Nimmo Gorakhpuri, a *hijra* and Anjum’s friend in Khwabgah and how “his” body betrays “her”. At the age of fourteen, she elopes with a State Transport bus driver but she is abandoned soon after by her husband because her body turned to be more and more masculine after the attainment of puberty. Nimmo revealed “his” anxieties later in front of Anjum as follows:

His body had suddenly begun to wage war on him. He grew tall and muscular. And hairy. In a panic he tried to remove the hair on his face and body with Burnol – burn ointment that made patches on his skin ... He developed an Adam’s apple that bobbed up and down. He longed to tear it out of his throat ... (Roy 24)

Society never understands the trauma that the transgenders or *hijras* have to undergo. The things that normal people get unhappy are like: price-rise, children’s school admissions, husband’s beatings, wives’ cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war etc. which are outside things that eventually settle down. But for *Hijras* all the problems and troubles, riots

are inside which can never be settled down as Nimmo Gorakhpuri says: “The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can’t.” (Roy 23)

People from the mainstream society experience a kind of embarrassment and fear towards them. People circulated rumours against them, as it is stated in the novel that: “People in the Duniya spread wicked rumours about Hijras kidnapping little boys and castrating them” (Roy 53). “Homophobia” is a term that refers to the negative attitudes and feelings towards homosexuality or the people who are identified or perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This homophobia is criticized as baseless by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *The Epistemology of the closet* (1990) where she exhorted the people to engage actively with “antihomophobic” projects.

The Third Gender peoples are always relegated to the margins by the mainstream society. Their dreams, their hopes, their desires have no value at all to the people of the *Duniya*, as referred to in the novel by Roy. So, the characters that do not belong to the *Duniya*, are made to create their own world. They are like a minority within minority. In order to make their presence felt, they perform some material practices such as, the use of slang words, clapping, demanding money, etc. In the novel, we come across some instances of slang words by the *hijra* community. Similarly, the typical *hijra* clapping, a type of code that only another *hijra* can decode the meaning of specific clap at the specific moment is a kind of practice *Hijras* performs to signify their difference from the common people. Such kind of performativity of *hijra* community identifies them as different from the other people.

From the above analysis, it is seen that there are no norms or stereotypes of gender as such as society imprints in the minds of the individuals. Every human being of either sex or gender has his or her own choice and rights to act or perform according to their instincts. As gender is a kind of performance as Butler said, there is nothing called essential gender-norm. So, heterosexuality as the only norm is none other than a fabrication of patriarchal agenda.

Heterosexual normativity should not order gender and such ordering should be opposed according to Butler. This heteronormativity relegates the *Hijras* or Third Gender people to the margins of society and makes them “unnatural” and “deviant”. In the novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy challenges and transgresses the heterosexual norm of gender identity and gives a space for all those people who are treated as outcasts or subalterns. Through the character of Anjum, not only the plight of *Hijras* in the Indian society is depicted, but also her fights against all the hardships and how she eventually gets able to create a space of her own is portrayed realistically. The society at large hardly realizes the pain, agony and hardships that the Third Gender community has to face and never tries to understand the fact that their body and mind disown their biological sex. Each being in the universe is indeed an integral part of nature. So, discrimination on the basis of the gender stereotypes is an injustice that needs to be addressed or redressed. Recently the Supreme Court of India has legalized the homosexuality on 6th September, 2018 which is step ahead to the liberal attitude – “live and let live.”

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