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An Exploration of the Struggles of the Third Gender in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Dr.D.Vimala[1], Mrs.K.Shanmuga Priya[2]
[1]Assistant Professor of English
Mannar Thirumalai Naicker College, Madurai.
[2]Assistant Professor of English
Achariya College of Engineering Technology
Puducherry.
[1]vimalad@mannarcollege.ac.in,[2]ks.shanmira31@gmail.com

Abstract:

In Indian literature, significant research has been conducted on themes such as gender discrimination and identity crises. However, despite these cultural explorations, the third gender continues to face intense marginalization within societal structures, a reality often reflected in Indian literary works.

Arundhati Roy's novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, delves deeply into the poignant struggles and societal challenges faced by the third gender, particularly through the character of Anjum, a transgender woman. Anjum's story captures the discrimination, alienation, and resilience that define the experiences of many individuals belonging to the third gender. While her novel is rooted in feminist discourse, it also offers a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of the unique issues faced by transgender individuals.

This research aims to examine themes of gender discrimination, identity crises, and the challenges experienced by transgender individuals as depicted in Roy's work. By applying psychoanalytical theory, the study seeks to explore Anjum's inner struggles, desires, and journey towards self-acceptance and identity in the face of societal discrimination. This approach will illuminate the psychological depth of Anjum's character and her broader significance within the socio-cultural context of the novel.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, Third gender, Identity crises, alienation, psychological.

Indian society, divided by gender, caste, and class, recognizes hijras as a "third gender," distinct from the male-female binary. Hijras, often marginalized, express feminine identities and are rooted in socio-religious traditions, believed to confer fertility through rituals. Despite their cultural significance, they face poverty, discrimination, and limited opportunities, leading some to engage in sex work or begging. Hijras include various non-cisgender and non-heterosexual individuals and have historically struggled for recognition, gaining visibility while battling colonial and societal oppression.

Transgenders in India, though recognized as a "third gender" in Hindu traditions, face harsh realities marked by violence, discrimination, and limited access to education, jobs, and healthcare.

Ostracized by society, they often form close-knit communities for safety and support. While Indian society exhibits a mix of fascination and mockery towards hijras, they endure as an oppressed class. Activists like Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi and Kalki Subramaniam have led movements for rights, culminating in the Supreme Court recognizing them as the legal third gender in 2014.

Judith Butler challenges the binary assumptions of sex and gender while expanding the discourse beyond the male-female framework. This perspective aligns with the idea that gender is not a fixed or predetermined attribute but a fluid and evolving construct shaped by cultural, historical, and individual experiences.

From a third-gender standpoint, the passage's exploration of whether gender is something one has or something one is becomes even more complex. If gender is a cultural interpretation of sex, then the existence of third-gender identities—such as hijras in South Asia, Two-Spirit people in Indigenous cultures, or non-binary identities in contemporary discussions—demonstrates that gender has always been more than just an extension of biological sex. These identities defy the rigid binary, showing that gender is not only performative but also deeply ingrained in social and political structures. The assertion that "culture becomes destiny" is especially relevant here, as third-gender individuals often navigate a world that resists recognizing their identity outside of male or female categories.

Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one"(Butler, Pg.8) could be extended beyond women to include those who "become" their gender identities outside the binary framework. The third-gender perspective would argue that gender is not merely assigned or performed within a binary, but is an expansive and autonomous process of self-definition. If, as the passage suggests, the body is always interpreted through cultural meanings, then the third gender body is a site of both resistance and redefinition, challenging dominant norms and demonstrating that sex itself is not a stable, prediscursive reality but a continuously evolving construct.

Ultimately, the passage's concern with whether gender is an imposed construct or an agentic appropriation takes on new dimensions in a third-gender framework. If bodies "come into being through the marks of gender," then third-gender identities expose the limitations of conventional gender discourse. These identities do not simply exist as deviations from the binary; rather, they reveal that gender is not a two-dimensional inscription on the body but a dynamic and pluralistic experience. The question is no longer just what gender are you? but rather how do we create space for identities that defy rigid categorizations?

In Chapter 2 of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Jahanara Begum's world is shattered when she discovers that her newborn son, Aftab, has both male and female genitalia. Initially, she reacts with terror, disbelief, and horror, her body physically convulsing in response to this unexpected reality. Her mind races through extreme emotions—fear, rejection, and even thoughts of ending both her and her child's life—before settling into a state of profound confusion.

In the strict gendered world, she knows, where even objects in Urdu have a masculine or feminine identity, her baby exists outside language, defying categorization. Though the words Hijra and Kinnar exist, they feel inadequate in defining her child's existence. The realization leaves her feeling unmoored, as if she has fallen into an abyss where everything she once understood has lost meaning.

Aftab's struggle as a third-gender individual begins at birth, not only with his body but also with society's rigid norms that fail to accommodate his identity. Jahanara, bound by cultural and religious expectations, sees Aftab's existence as a challenge to the binary system of gender. Despite her turmoil, she ultimately chooses silence, deciding not to share the secret even with her husband. She cleans herself up and rests beside her baby, but unlike the Christian God who rested after bringing order to the universe, Jahanara rests after her creation has unraveled her understanding of the world.

For the first few years of Aftab's life, Jahanara Begum kept his identity a secret, hoping his female genitalia would heal. She remained fiercely protective, keeping him close even after the birth of her younger son, Saqib. Her overprotectiveness was not questioned, as she had long awaited a son.At five, Aftab joined a boys' madrassa, excelling in Quranic recitation, though comprehension remained uncertain. However, his true talent was music. His parents enrolled him with Ustad Hameed Khan, a renowned Hindustani classical musician. Aftab showed remarkable talent, mastering complex ragas and singing with the grace of a seasoned performer.Initially, his gift was praised, but soon, teasing and ridicule from other children began mocking his ambiguous gender. Unable to bear the humiliation, Aftab stopped attending music classes publicly. Seeing his distress, Ustad Hameed continued teaching him privately. However, Aftab eventually refused to attend school altogether.

> "He could sing Chaiti and Thumri with the accomplishment and poise of a Lucknow courtesan. At first people were amused and even encouraging, but soon the snickering and teasing from other children began: 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, 16)

Anjum's journey highlights the struggles Hijras face in a rigidly gendered society. After finding refuge in the Khwabgah, she embraced her identity, dressing in feminine attire and adopting the mannerisms of her community. However, her struggle with self-acceptance remained, culminating in deep shame over her body. Seeking validation, she underwent a painful, flawed gender-affirming surgery that left her physically altered but emotionally unfulfilled. Despite becoming a sought-after lover, she never experienced sexual pleasure again. The medical exploitation she faced reflects the systemic neglect and deception Hijras endure. Even after decades in the Khwabgah, Anjum remained an outsider in both her biological and chosen families. Rejected by her birth family and witnessing generational shifts in the Hijra community, she found herself without a true home. Her story encapsulates the Hijra struggle for identity, dignity, and belonging in a society that refuses to accommodate those outside the binary.

Anjum's bond with Zainab highlights the struggles Hijras face in their search for love, family, and acceptance. Discovering the abandoned child awakens in Anjum an overwhelming sense of motherhood—an emotion often denied to Hijras by society. While the Khwabgah provides a safe space where Zainab is embraced, Anjum's fears and insecurities resurface. Her excessive care, emotional outbursts, and bedtime stories reflect the trauma of a life marked by rejection. Despite creating a unique family, she continues to battle societal norms that exclude Hijras from conventional parenthood. Her struggle to nurture Zainab while confronting her own past exposes the deep emotional wounds of marginalization. This passage sheds light on the Hijra community's relentless fight for dignity, the right to love, and a place in a world that often renders them invisible.

Anjum, a hijra living in Khwabgah, begins to feel restless and disconnected from the life she once embraced. Though she initially speaks of leaving without much thought, the idea takes hold, pushing her toward an emotional and existential crisis. Concerned about her behavior, her companions consult Dr. Bhagat, a Hindu doctor known for his generic prescriptions of calming pills. To avoid political tensions, they omit details about Anjum's experiences in Gujarat. Dr. Bhagat prescribes medication, but Anjum refuses to take it, deepening her rebellion against expectations imposed upon her.

As her frustration grows, Anjum symbolically rejects the identity the world has constructed for her. She burns memorabilia of her past, documentaries, photographs, and articles that once celebrated her uniqueness as a hijra. This act signifies her rejection of the limited acceptance society offers: one that treats her as an exotic subject rather than a fully human individual. The ultimate heartbreak comes when her adopted daughter, Zainab, chooses to distance herself, saying, "Mummy's never happy." This moment solidifies Anjum's feeling of alienation, even from the child she loves the most.

Determined to start anew, Anjum abandons her hijra identity, shedding her traditional attire for plain Pathan suits, men's shoes, and a second-hand plastic anorak. She leaves Khwabgah and moves into a neglected graveyard where generations of her family are buried. The graveyard, adjacent to a government mortuary, symbolizes both exile and self-reinvention, a place wherethe forgotten and unclaimed dead are laid to rest, mirroring Anjum's own sense of displacement.

Anjum's struggles extend beyond personal turmoil; they represent the larger battle faced by the third-gender community. She longs for an ordinary life, particularly as a mother to Zainab, a lost child she once found near Jama Masjid. In Zainab, Anjum finds a purpose that momentarily soothes her internal conflicts. Despite opposition from Khwabgah, she insists on raising Zainab, showering her with love, gifts, and bedtime stories. Initially, her storytelling is intense, reflecting her struggles with identity, but she gradually softens her narratives to suit the child's world.

Through Anjum's journey, the novel underscores the struggles of third-gender individuals in their pursuit of acceptance, love, and normalcy. Society's rigid gender norms deny them traditional roles, such as motherhood, but Anjum's determination challenges these limitations. Her move to the graveyard is both an escape and an assertion of autonomy, a refusal to conform to a world that only accepts her on its terms. Her story questionswhat it truly means to belong and whether society will ever recognize the humanity of those who exist beyond the binary.

Chapter 7, The Landlord, subtly reflects themes of identity, marginalization, and social exclusion, which closely parallel the struggles of the third gender. Tilottama's ambiguous background, lack of belonging, and rejection by her family mirror the experiences of third-gender individuals who are often disowned due to societal norms. Like many transgender and non-binary people, Tilo exists in a liminal spaceshe is neither fully accepted nor understood. Her mother's scandal and the secrecy surrounding her parentage reflect the way families erase or hide third-gender members out of fear of social ostracization. Tilo's refusal to return home and her struggle for financial independence further highlight the alienation many third-gender individuals face, forcing them into self-reliance. The caste-based discrimination against her father also mirrors the layered oppression faced by the third gender, who often experience multiple forms of social stigma. Her choice to live in marginalized spaces, a slum and later near a dargah, echoes the realityof hijra communities in South Asia, who find refuge in similar outcast spaces.

Tilo's existence is marked by resilience and survival, much like third-gender individuals who navigate a world that refuses to acknowledge their full humanity.

Beyond themes of gender and marginalization, the novel also delves into deep psychological struggles. Tilo's detachment from her past and the mystery surrounding her identity suggest emotional repression, a coping mechanism often developed by individuals with traumatic histories. Her lack of familial ties and reluctance to engage with her origins indicate abandonment trauma, manifesting as self-isolation and distrust in relationships. Her interactions with Musa and Naga reflect this emotional distance, she remains an enigma even to those closest to her.

Musa, on the other hand, appears emotionally reserved, his past trauma buried beneath a quiet demeanour. His obsession with drawing fragmented horses might symbolize a subconscious struggle with lost freedom or a yearning for escape. In contrast, Naga's boisterous, self-absorbed, and attention-seeking nature could stem from deep-seated insecurity, masked by performative charm.

In conclusion, each character battles their own psychological burdens, mirroring the internal struggles of individuals grappling with unresolved trauma, identity conflicts, and emotional isolation. While the narrative portrays external societal oppression, it also intricately weaves in the internal psychological turmoil of its characters, making their struggles profoundly human and universally relatable.Anjum, a transgender woman in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, epitomizes the struggle of the third gender in a rigidly binary society. Her journey reflects Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as she continuously negotiates her identity in response to societal expectations and personal experiences. The psychological distress she endures aligns with Erik Erikson'stheory of psychosocial development, particularly in the stage of identity versus role confusion, as she seeks a sense of belonging in a world that refuses to fully accept her.Through Anjum, Roy delves into the profound psychological impact of gender marginalization, illustrating how external oppression manifests as deep internal conflict, ultimately shaping her resilience and quest for a space of her own.

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