

Transgender Literature Of India – An Avant-Garde Arrow In The Quiver Of Postcolonial Literature

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Abstract

*Transgenders of India who have been marginalized and decentered for decades have taken to writing to let their unheard voices echo in the ears of society. Their writings are impregnated with their ordeals to be recognized as mere human beings let alone to be treated equal. However, this was not the fate of Indian transgenders throughout the history. In fact, they enjoyed revered and respectable lives till the advent of the West. Colonizers with their tool of cultural imperialism seized the psyche of Indians and metamorphosed their attitudes towards transgenders. The present paper is an attempt made to consider transgender literature of India as a part of Postcolonial literature produced by the nation. For this purpose the present paper studies four autobiographies of Indian Transgenders Vidya's *I Am Vidya*, A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me.*, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, and Manobi Bandopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Laxmi*.*

Key Words: *Postcolonial Literature, Transgender Literature, Cultural Imperialism, Gender, Hijras*

1. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism as a discipline emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its popularity as an influential discipline rests on the works such as Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* published in 1961, Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and *Culture and Imperialism* in 1993, Gayatri Spivak's 1987 *In Other Worlds*, Homi Bhabha's 1980 work *Nation and Narration*, Helen Tiffin and Bill Ashcroft's *The Empire Writes Back* published in 1989. Nagarajan asserts that "the nomenclature 'postcolonialism' is used to refer 'to all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.'" (185) Postcolonialism examines and analyses the literature that was produced in response to colonialism i.e. postcolonial literature.

2. TRANSGENDERS OF INDIA

Transgenders in India were well treated if not as equals to the heteronormative society until the advent of colonization. There are references to three genders in various mythological texts of Hindus. According to Devdutt Pattanaik contrary to the western world, queerness and gender diversity are very natural in Hindu world. “. . . in the Hindu World, culture (*sanskriti*, in Sanskrit) remains an artificial imposition on nature (*prakriti*), enabling humans to discover their humanity by offering a chance to make room for, or reject, diversity.” (9) In his seminal book *Shikhandi and other Queer Tales they don't tell you*, Devdutt narrates thirty (30) queer stories from Hindu Mythology of different states of India. All these stories show gender fluidity where gender boundaries of male and female are completely erased and merged. They celebrate queerness in all its grandeur. Devdutt shares three stories about transgenders which are very popular amongst the hijra community of India. The Aravan story depicts the descent of the term ‘Aravani’ the most revered term to address transgenders in Tamil Nadu. Bahuchara Mata narrative from Orissa traces the story behind the hijras of India worshipping Bahuchara Mata as their mother goddess. He also shares oral tradition of hijras from Ramayana, where Ram promises the hijras, who stayed on the banks of the river that separates the forest from Kingdom of Ayodhya, for fourteen years awaiting the return of Ram from exile, great political power in the Kali Yuga and also moksha, freedom from rebirth.

Transgenders were well treated and adorned with respectful positions during Mughal rule. Though the transgenders in India explicitly date their origin to the pre-Mughal period in India they claim that the Muslim rulers brought them closer rather than pushing them away. The hijra communities were given lands and property to have an insured living.

Eunuchs in India were often accorded respect in the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal courts, holding positions of eminence especially under the Khiljis of Delhi in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and under the Mughals from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Although many eunuchs were initially brought as slaves into the houses of Muslim nobility in principalities such as Awadh and Hyderabad, they were accorded respect and trusted with sensitive positions, including guarding the *harim*, or inner/female spaces within the palace (Reddy 8)

India has more than 200 years of Colonial past. Colonialization has left paralyzing effects on the psyche of Indians. The advent of colonization made the transgenders of India - ‘others’. The British occluded them from the Mughal courts. They are marginalized and criminalized by the British. The agricultural lands and property were taken back by the British as they were not inherited by the transgenders through blood. In addition to that the mere sight of transgenders and the importance they were given in Mughal courts was so infuriating for the British.

Accounts of early European travelers showed that they were repulsed by the sight of Hijras and could not comprehend why they were given so much respect in the royal courts and other institutions. In the second half of the 19th century, the British colonial administration vigorously sought to criminalize the hijra community and to deny them the civil rights. Hijras were considered to be separate caste or tribe in different parts of India by the colonial administration. (Michelraj 18)

Later British criminalized hijras of India and introduced the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. According to the act the hijras are the section of people who don sarees and dance on streets and are involved in kidnapping and castrating children. This wrong notion about hijras was so strongly etched on the minds of Indians that even after the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952; the prejudicial attitudes prevail against hijras in India till date. They are seen as criminals and their presence is scared by many.

Post Independence, begging and sex work has become the only livelihood for transgenders. As Laxmi shares,

Hijras were an integral part of the courtly traditions of Muslim kings. But when they were overthrown by the British, the hijras landed on the street. Today, hijras beg in shops and other public places, and do sex work, not out of choice, but out of necessity. How, otherwise, can we keep body and soul together. (178)

However, in North India they do ‘Badaai’ i.e., singing and dancing at newlywed couples’ homes and at homes of new born babies as their blessings are believed to come true. “For many Indians—both upper- and middle-class—hijras exist (and to some extent have always existed) at the periphery of their imaginaries, making themselves visible only on certain circumscribed ritual occasions.” (Reddy 3)

As Revathi mentions in her autobiography, when she asked one of the senior nanis (grandmother in transgender community) “Why do they go like this to collect money? Can’t they work?” to which her nani replied:

In this Hindi country, we hijras are meant to do this and not other things. We ask money from shops, collect *badaai* . . . In the old days, hijras waited upon queens and princesses. But today there are no queens; the rule of kings and queens has given away to the rule of ministers. But this government has not given us other work to do. In Indira Gandhi’s time – God bless her memory – they built houses for hijras and other poor people. (Revathi 44)

It can be observed from the senior transgenders narration that the ebb of kings and kingdoms has bought the fate of begging to the transgenders. The decline of kings and kingdoms is a result of Colonization and thus it can be made a point that the advent of colonialism is largely responsible to the contemporary pathetic life of transgenders in India..

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF POST COLONIAL LITERATURE

Post-colonial literature is the literature of those colonized countries, those who have been marginalized, trying to break the typical “Orientalization” and misinterpretation of their culture and heritage by the colonizers – British. Colonialism has always been a powerful mode of exploitation. Colonialism completely affected the difference in race, culture, ethnicity, forms of knowledge, advancement in technology and political system. Postcolonial writing reflected upon cultural colonialism, native identity and anti-colonial resistance. Post-colonial literature was primarily considered to be the literature of Third World countries that were once colonized by the British. Third world countries included Africa, Asia, the Caribbean Island etc. However, the canon of Postcolonial Literature also sometimes includes the literature of Second World countries such as New Zealand, Australia and Canada who achieved their independence long before the third world nations. However, it is generally criticized that the division of world countries into first-world, second-world, and third-world itself is Eurocentric and they put themselves in the main position or center and then compare and position other countries in parameter to them. Edward Said introduced the term ‘Orientalism’ to define the Eurocentric universalism practiced in England, Europe and the USA, which “takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not.” (Barry 186) According to Said Orientalism is the “discourse of the west about the East” (Narayan 186), “is a particular and long standing way of identifying the East as ‘Other’ and inferior to the west.” (Barry 186) and is considered as a result of the “overbearing attitude of the nineteenth and early twentieth century European imperialism. Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction

between the orient and the occident.” (Nagarajan 187) Thus other than the European imperialism everything else is marginalized and made ‘other’ by the colonists. Nevertheless, according to M.H.Abrams “the term **orientalism** is now sometimes applied to cultural imperialism by means of the control of discourse not only in the orient but anywhere in the world.” (306) Therefore, the literature of the culturally imperialized groups everywhere in the world fit into the canon of Orientalism. According to Nagarajan postcolonial literature is

the literature that was affected by the imperial process, the literature that grew in response to colonial domination, right from the time of contact between the colonizer and the colonized down to the contemporary situation. (185)

4. TRANSGENDER LITERATURE AS POST-COLONIAL LITERATURE

Thus the contemporary literature that shows the effects of Colonization and its aftermath falls under the category of postcolonial literature. Hence, it can be drawn out that the transgenders whose life was affected by the colonization and hence been the same till date, their literature seeking for just in the society is the postcolonial literature. Peter Barry owes the ancestry of postcolonial criticism back to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) published in French. In this book Fanon the French psychiatrist proposed the idea of ‘cultural resistance’ which constitutes of two steps. “If the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one’s own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued.” (Barry 186) According to Fanon for centuries together the Europeans spread their colonizing power by devaluing the past of the nations they colonized. They always portrayed the pre-colonial era of those nations as that of the pre-civilized and sometimes barbaric. Similarly, in India transgenders during the pre-colonized era were not treated as badly as they were and are treated post colonization. It was the portrayal of the colonizers that the transgender lot of India was criminals and was to be kept at safe distance from the mainstream society for the benefit and safety of the mainstream society. They treated transgenders of India as a separate caste and expelled them from the mainstream society. As Bill Ashcroft says in *The Empire Writes Back*,

We use the term ‘post-colonial’, however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because we have continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. (2)

Thus the process of marginalizing the transgenders which was initiated by European imperial aggression is still continued in India till date. The upcoming generations of post colonized India were taught to see the history, culture and progress from the perspective of the colonizers and were forced to practice them blindly. It can be said that transgenders of India are appallingly affected and destroyed by ‘cultural denigration’ meaning “the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model.” (Ashcroft 9) Thus, the discrimination against the transgenders still exists at a substantial level in India. As Nagarajan points out in his book

There is an inherent clash between the native, indigenous precolonial cultures, and the culture imposed on the natives by the imperial forces. Cultural colonisation still exists, and there has been no complete decolonization. (185)

As said thus almost all nations that were once the victims of colonization are not yet completely decolonized but still carry on the traits and traces of colonization. Transgender Literature just like any other postcolonial writing reflects upon cultural colonialism, loss of their identity and being marginalized. Taking Spivaks ‘subaltern’, transgenders in India are

the Subaltern subjects – the non-elite people who are denied access to power and who have distorted representation or self-expressed voice. M. H. Abrams states that “The **subaltern** has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by the European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse;” (306) Thus the transgenders of the India are constructed by the European discourse as criminals and untouchables that pose a great threat to the smooth functioning of the ‘normal society’ and hence were to be marginalized from the mainstream society. They are the “gender subalterns” who are always defined via their differences from the bipolar genders – male and female. As Nagarajan claims Postcolonialism refers to “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (185), transgenders of India do fit rightly into the quiver of Postcolonialism, as transgenders and their culture were affected from the moment of colonization to the present day.

The foremost stratagem that had been prevalently used by imperial rulers to uphold their power was “divide and rule” policy. This policy played an essential role in making sure that the supremacy of imperial rulers was successful in all the 33 colonies they stepped their foot. Richard Morrock in his ‘Heritage of Strife: The effects of colonialist “Divide and Rule” strategy upon the colonized peoples’ characterizes “divide and rule” as the “conscious effort of an imperialist power to create and/or turn to its own advantage the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, tribal, or religious differences within the population of a subjugated colony” (6). The fundamental strategy of “divide and rule” as executed by Western colonialists were to generate disparity and disturbances within the conquered populace; to utilize thus created differences for the advantage and gain of the colonial supremacy and then to politicize such differences in a way that they remain etched in the postcolonial colonies even after they leave those colonies. In order to generate and create such differences and disparities the colonialists had implemented various ways. The prominent ways they followed were to create and establish differences between two ethnic groups; segregating certain aggressive and hostile ethnic groups and trying to criminalize them; creating new linguistic and cultural differences and amplifying those already existing differences; and most importantly by religious conversion. On those lines, transgenders of India were segregated and criminalized for the very own good of the imperialist rulers and the colonialists politicized thus created antagonism.

Transgender literature of India can be considered as the ‘indigenous’ response of the transgender community of India where they question and challenge the colonial representation of their community and its repercussion that exists till date in contemporary India. As said by Bill Ashcroft

The alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the ‘margin’ turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy. (12)

Similarly, the marginalization towards the transgenders of India has turned into a creative energy aiming at the abolition of the marginalization itself. These autobiographies can be considered as writing back to the center, where the center is occupied by both Eurocentricism as well as the mainstream Indian Society which still marginalizes and discriminates transgenders. The Themes advanced by the postcolonial critics like that of “cultural identity, double consciousness, unhomeliness and alienation” (Nagarajan 190) can be observed in these autobiographies but in relation to their gender. These autobiographies are crammed with the themes of gender identity, double consciousness or crisis in relation to their gender, unhomeliness and alienation because of their gender choice. Hence, transgender

literature of India can be studied as Post-Colonial Literature. As the literature of transgenders portrays the fight of transgenders for their just position and place in society it is also the Literature of Empowerment.

5. CONCLUSION

Transgender Literature of India not only portrays the imitation of human action but also pleads for a change in their attitude towards the transgenders of the nation. It clearly displays the characteristics of Postcolonial Literature and would definitely add to the existing body of Postcolonial literature produced by the nation. It can play as a tool in order to sensitize and spread awareness in the society. Hence, the present paper claims transgender literature to be considered as a part of Postcolonial literature produced by the nation in resistance to the colonial imperialism.

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