

## The Hijras, Gender Dysphoria and Fiction: A Psychosocial Perspective

**Dr. Rajeshwar Mittapalli**

Professor of English

Kakatiya University, Warangal -500009 Telangana

### Introduction

Of late there have been a plethora of fictional works and films focussed on the hijras of India who are popularly described as the third gender. They are also a part of the cultural ethos of India, since they double as ritual beggars, performers and spiritual beings. They have been around for centuries, enjoying great respect and importance during the Mughal era, but gradually losing their position over time. They are now located on the margins of the mainstream Indian society and are having it hard to make a living, and consequently resorting to prostitution and other unacceptable activities.

Creative response to the hijras began with Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* (1990) which has for one of its protagonists a hijra hermaphrodite, called Bhagmati. Singh's novel was followed by John Irving's *A Son of the Circus* (1994) which depicts a group of Bombay hijras in realistic terms. More recently, Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* (2003), Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012), Anosh Irani's *The Parcel* (2016) and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) have dealt with the hijra theme from a variety of perspectives. Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (2013) too features the hijra Kamala who pays with her life for entering into an 'unacceptable' marriage with the gay Subbu. Besides literary works, some Indian films too have explored the hijra theme with deep understanding. Mahesh Bhatt's film *Tamanna* (1997) casts a hijra in the lead role and treats her with great sensitivity. This Bombay hijra, Tikku, adopts an abandoned baby girl and brings her up facing many hardships along the way. Kalpana Lajmi's *Darmiyaan: In Between* (1997) tells the story of the intersexed Immi, born to a Bollywood actress of the 1940s, but is constantly claimed by the hijras. Immi resists them and stays with his mother helping her when she needs it the most and eventually even adopts a male child. Yogesh Bharadwaj's film *Shabnam Mausi* (2005), based on the life of a hijra politician of the same name from Madhya Pradesh, depicts her as a heroic, even larger than life, figure facing innumerable

problems within her hijra household on the one hand and helping hapless people out in the street, on the other. Apart from these works of art, there have also been autobiographies/biographies galore which seek to tell the stories of hijras and the challenges they face as they transition to hijrahood and live out their lives as practising hijras. Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is admittedly based on one such life narrative, *Myself, Mona Ahmed* (2001) by Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, which portrays the life of the transwoman Mona Ahmed who made a Delhi graveyard her home after dissociating herself from the hijra community. The critique of the hijra cult implicit in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is also reminiscent of another life narrative, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi.

### **Three Recent Novels on the Hijras**

This article proposes to discuss three recent novels that have extensively and realistically dealt with the life of hijras – John Irving's *A Son of the Circus*, Arudhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Anosh Irani's *The Parcel*. These novels critique the lifestyle and social positioning of the hijras today. While they seem to occasionally sympathise with the hijras in their capacity as isolated individuals, they indubitably fault the system that encourages young boys to embrace hijrahood. By means of telling the stories of the hijras, and not necessarily attempting to idealise them or their lifestyle, each one of the novels suggests a different solution to the issue but finally leaves it to the better judgement of the readers.

John Irving's *A Son of the Circus* depicts the hijras as a community in the true light, and without giving it the slightest ideological colouring. Irving may be a foreigner who is perhaps insufficiently grounded in Indian reality, but he does enjoy the advantage of an outsider's unbiased view on the hijras. His novel tells, among other things, the story of a group of hijras who are incensed by the fact that a hijra has been cast as a serial killer in a film entitled *Inspector Dhar and the Cage-Girl Killer*. To complicate the situation, a real serial killer starts murdering prostitutes. It is somehow suggested that, because of business rivalry, a hijra might be responsible for the murder of these women prostitutes. The hijras after all command a higher price than regular women prostitutes because they are 'more like women than women' themselves – bolder and demonstrative in terms of

offering pleasure. They take offence not only at one of their members being shown in such a poor light but because such a depiction harms their business interests as well. They therefore want to avenge themselves on the actor who has played the role of Inspector Dhar but in their own special way, i.e. make him a hijra by cutting off his private parts. *A Son of the Circus* thus suggests that the traditional lifestyle of the hijras – blessing, begging and performing – has become unsustainable in modern times leaving them with only prostitution for survival although it is against their stated spiritual position. They know only too well that in this profession they outdo even real women. They jealously guard against any attempts at discrediting them since that would potentially drive the customers away. They no longer regard sex work as incidental to their position as sacred beings. It is now a regular profession although it is prohibited by the law. The novel further implies that the hijras should be treated the same way as prostitutes in general for practising a morally reprehensible and illegal occupation. They should be guilty, not for professing a different gender, but for pursuing an illegal profession. They should meet the same fate as others who break the law as a group, and encouraged to finally disband themselves.

Arundhati Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* features a hijra called Anjum as one of its chief protagonists. Anjum is basically a hermaphrodite but she is thoroughly inclined towards the feminine. When she is hardly into her teens, unable to bear the harassment of her peers, if not family members, who find her behaviour rather odd and unacceptable, and obliged by the somewhat special concoction of hormones in her body she quits her natal home and joins a group of hijras who live in a home called the Khwabgah (house of dreams). Eventually she becomes a full-fledged hijra undergoing emasculation surgery and does everything the hijras have traditionally done – blessing, begging, performing and prostitution. Although initially it has felt like a heaven on earth to be a part of the hijra community, the realities of hijra life begin to impinge on her and she starts feeling increasingly uncomfortable with her chosen mode of life. The endless rivalries among the inmates of the Khwabgah, the all too frequent threats of suicide and the daily humiliations and psychological challenges she is required to face make her disillusioned and dejected. To add to everything else, she is robbed of the girl child she has adopted and denied an opportunity to rise to the position of ustad of the Khwabgah

because she has not kept pace with modern times. She is eventually disenchanted with the hijra way of life itself because she no longer finds it any the different from the world she has left behind. She charts her own path, by taking up residence at an abandoned graveyard in Delhi, and starts living as a transwoman, on her own terms. She also extends help and encouragement to similarly placed subalterns by giving them shelter and succour.

Anosh Irani's novel *The Parcel* unveils another aspect of modern hijra life. Given the fact that the space for their mode of life has considerably shrunk now, many hijras have started resorting to graver criminal activities than practicing prostitution, such as abetting rape of trafficked minor girls in Kamathipura of Mumbai. The protagonist of the novel Madhu is charged with the responsibility of preparing – psychologically and physically – a ten year old Nepalese girl called Kinjal (the titular 'parcel') for sexual initiation with a HIV positive man who has paid a hefty sum to the brothel owner Padma believing that having sex with a virgin would cure him of HIV. Madhu herself has had a miserable childhood, shunned by her own parents and ostracized by her peers on account of gender dysphoria. She is manipulated into joining the hijras by gurumai, the head of the Hijra House, at an early age, and after the mandatory castration she is obliged to take to sex work. During the prime years of her life she is a much sought after hijra prostitute earning handsomely and enriching gurumai in the process. When she is into her thirties, however, she gets tired of prostitution and instead opts for badhai work at weddings and childbirth ceremonies. When she violates an unwritten hijra code at one such badhai performance, i.e. by exposing her private parts and thus scaring the daylights out of the bride, she is relegated to the position of a beggar at traffic lights. Whatever work she does she has to share half her earnings with gurumai as mandated by tradition. She has, along the way, learnt to put her past behind her, treating it as an emptiness pervading her mind. She now tries to empty Kinjal of her past, erase any hopes for the future and make her feel like a commodity. In doing so she behaves more like the Khwaja Sara of Hari Kunzru's novel *The Impressionist* the difference being that, instead of a boy, it is a girl whose bodily integrity is being violated here. However, she is a hijra with a conscience – one who has been endowed with some interiority – as demonstrated by her many acts of generosity, her bouts of self-pity and her secret longing to have an honest job such as that

of a baker or butcher. She is aware of how reprehensible it is to do what she is doing – ruining the life of an innocent girl – but she still cannot help it. Her gurumai is under tremendous pressure from influential real estate developers to sell the Hijra House, and only Padma can save the situation! But Padma, as well as the seven hijra nayaks who govern the hijra establishment, betray gurumai resulting in her death. While Padma's betrayal is predictable on account of competition in the flesh trade between the brothel madams and hijra gurus, that of the nayaks smacks of something rotten within the hijra community itself. While claiming to be asexual and spiritual the hijras have heavily relied on sex work for survival, but the trade itself – whether plied by madams or the hijras – has lost much of its relevance and patronage with growing awareness among men of the health hazards and legal risks involved. Madhu seems to understand that the hijras have lost their economic niche and social acceptance. By sacrificing her own life in order to save Kinjal from her near certain doom she symbolically marks the end of the hijras as a social organization.

## Conclusion

The three novels analysed in this article underscore a common point: Hijrahood is not something that is happily embraced or practiced by intersexed or gender deviant individuals. It is most often the last resort for them because, while the world around them shuns them, the hijra community welcomes them for its own reasons – the hijra gurus have a vested interest in admitting as many chelas (the new initiates) as possible.

Social scientists, gender theorists and activists of various descriptions usually comment on the current degradation of the hijras and make many suggestions for uplifting them in social and economic terms and thus eventually mainstream them. They do not, however, stop to enquire into the psychosocial, or even genetic factors, that contribute to the gender deviance in these young men in the first place. A deeper probing into this aspect would reveal that at the unconscious level of their personality, they feel an irresistible attraction towards femininity for the many advantages it enjoys because of the widespread but invisible gynocentrism in our society. The urge to embrace femininity manifests itself in the form of hormonal changes and behaviour patterns that are deemed deviant. In social terms, once they assume identity as hijras, these young men invariably

become dependent on the mainstream society and hence unproductive in economic terms as well. This development is obviously undesirable in the larger interest of society.

The crux of the problem thus lies in the ways the two dominant genders have been traditionally ordered – while women are privileged for the intrinsic value they have and are therefore protected and provisioned by default, men are severely disadvantaged as they are constantly challenged to prove their worth by contributing resources or be dismissed as nonentities. Men just not ‘are’; they must ‘become,’ and that entails endless sacrifices. It is no wonder then, that for a few susceptible young men at least femininity holds an irresistible attraction and offers psychological comfort, and masculinity by contrast appears as a formidable challenge and even as a menace.

Is there, then, a way out? Many centuries of gynocentric programming has conditioned men to accept their disposability as a given and deprioritize their interests by default. It might help to din some red pill knowledge into their heads, as advocated by modern intellectuals and educators such as Tomassi, Farrell, Peterson, Wright and Elam, so that they would realise their current position in society, which has been rendered highly precarious by a large, and ever growing, number of anti-male laws among other things. They should then be encouraged to be their own mental point of origin, and to reprioritize themselves over everything else – optimize their physical and psychological health, build remunerative careers and exercise full control over their own financial resources, fix their social and legal vulnerabilities by collective action, manage and moderate male hormones by exercising willpower and solidly grounding themselves in reality. Above all else, they should develop some in-group preference by not automatically treating fellow men as rivals since the objects of their affection, over whom they traditionally fought among themselves, can now destroy their lives at a moment’s notice actively backed as they are by the full force of the law. They can thus emerge as strong men capable of facing the vicissitudes of life with equanimity rather than allowing their masculinity to atrophy. In the era of alternative media, including social media, it should not at all be difficult to disseminate this, much needed, knowledge among men and even build social support networks for them. Vulnerable young men will not then feel a strong psychological need to flee their masculinity and transition to femininity. They will

instead grow psychologically strong to face the vicissitudes of life and emerge victorious in the end.

Strong men help others better than those who are weak. That is how it has been throughout history. Whenever a society lost its masculine edge, like the Eloi of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, it lost out to a more masculine race. Therefore, a course correction is highly in order. It is time masculinity is restored to its rightful place in the interest of all – men, women and even those professing other genders including the hijras and those considering hijrahood as an option in dealing with their gender issues. The three novels discussed in this article indubitably underscore this point.

### Works Cited

- Bharadwaj, Yogesh, director. *Shabnam Mausi*. Sudesh Bhonsle and Manoj Jaiswal, 2005.
- Bhatt, Mahesh, director. *Tamanna*. Pooja Bhatt Productions, 1997.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Penguin, 2000.
- Farrell, Warren. *The Myth of Male Power*. Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001.
- Irani, Anosh. *The Parcel*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.
- Irving, John. *A Son of the Circus*. Random House, 1994.
- Kunzru, Hari. *The Impressionist*. Penguin Books, 2003.
- Lajmi, Kalpana, director. *Darmiyaan: In between*. R.V. Pandit, 1997.
- Peterson, Jordan B. *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Random House, 2018.
- Revathi, A. *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*. Translated by V. Geetha, Penguin India, 2010.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin Random House India, 2017.
- Singh, Dayanita, and Mona Ahmed. *Myself, Mona Ahmed*. Scalo, 2001.
- Singh, Khushwant. *Delhi: A Novel*. Penguin Books, 1990. SCRIBD, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/219143451/Delhi-Khushwant-Singh#>. Accessed on 25 July 2020.
- Thayil, Jeet. *Narcopolis*, Kindle Book, Faber & Faber, 2012.
- Tomassi, Rollo. *The Rational Male: Positive Masculinity*, vol. 3, Counterflow Media LL, 2017.
- Wells, H.G. *The Time Machine*. William Heinemann, 1985.
- Wright, Peter, and Paul Elam. *Red Pill Psychology: Psychology for Men in a Gynocentric World*, E-book, Independent, 2017.

\*\*\*