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REPRESENTATION OF TRANSGENDER IN INDIAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE

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Abstract:

This paper is prepared to explore the 'transgender' and its 'reflections' in the ever changing course of our world-wide scenario, particularly in our Mother India. The term 'transgender', which is chiefly related with socio- cultural attribution, gets profoundly discussed from various representations, including cultural, mythical, social and the literary arena. The cultural symbolism and depiction of gender ideology, its gendered stereotypes are lucidly discussed in the immediate means of representation, and more emphatically analyzed with respect to a larger context of socio-historical processes and relations. On literary perspective, three basic elements like 'social production, consumption and representation' are explicated with reference to some mythical epics and Indian literature in English. An attempt to aesthetize the socio-cultural constructs behind gender and its multilayered representations, irrespective time and place, is adopted for a larger concept of 'humanity for humanity's sake' .

Keywords/Phrases: Gender, representation, literary arena, socio-cultural constructs, anesthetize, humanity.

1. Studies of Transgender

The very term “transgender” is a socio-cultural construct in association with the most prevalent other genders ---masculinity and femininity. Transgender is a part of Indian culture and specifically a sub-field of LGBT in postmodern perspective. If masculinity is called the First Sex, if femininity is the Second Sex, then transgender is known as the Third Sex, rather it may be called a combination of both. Identity of this Transgender varies from time to time and from place to place. In India. It is interesting to know that this third gender in Punjabi culture is called “Khusra”, in Telugu, it is “Kojja”, in English, it is “hermaphrodite” or “eunuch”, and in Bengali, the transgender people are known as ‘hijras’. More interestingly, the population of this third sex in India, according to 2011 census report, is about 5 million in relation with the total population of 1.5 billion. Though their configuration in total population is very negligible, though they are sometimes called *man minus man*, rather *man plus woman*, their contribution is enough to the cultural and virtual worlds of India.

The term *hijra or transgender* is a ‘term- umbrella’ which gets inclusion of all the non-cissexual as well as non-heterosexual individuals like transsexuals, transvestites, hermaphrodites, inter-sexed, eunuchs, impotents, homosexuals, bisexuals, androgynies, gynomimetics, emasculated, impotent, castrated, effeminate, transgendered and so on. In simple words, all those who are somehow sexually anomalous or dysfunctional are considered the above. As per their own narrative, the *hijras or transgender* people themselves like to distinguish between those who are born with ambiguous genitals and those who are made such through castration. As in Western

culture gender and sex are generally categorized under two distinct realms: male and female (identities which to some are determined solely biologically), in the Indian culture they have grown to become a prominent and well-known member of the society, a separate entity which carries its own culture but undergoes huge discrimination and struggles for its basic fundamental rights from the time of the European, specially British, colonialism.

2. Myth behind Transgender

This third sex/ third gender/ hijra carries immense explication in the context of mythical and religious cultures of India. In ancient myth, Shiva is the incarnation of creative asceticism. And therefore Shiva was once asked to create the world, but he took so long to do so that the power of creation was given to another Creator Brahma. When Shiva understood his delay and came to learn that the world was already created by Brahma, he became so angry that he broke off his own phallus, saying. "There is no use for this" and threw it into earth. Paradoxically, on earth the phallus of Shiva proved to be the failure of individual fertility, but it became the source of universal fertility. Similarly, the hijras are individually impotent but culturally they are the images of blessing to others. Myth of hijras eventually became so popular that even the epic hero Arjuna, in the fourth book of *Mahabharatta* entitled 'Virata Parva', took the guise of Brihannala for one year and participated in various types of celibacy and merrymaking.

3. Cultural and Literary Recognition of Transgender

The recognition of Third Gender is recorded in Indian history as early as 8th century BC. The Rig Veda, for example, says that before creation the world lacked all distinctions, including those of sex and gender. Ancient poets often express this concept with androgynous or hermaphrodite images, such as male with a womb, a male deity with breasts etc. Historically, the Mughal emperors favoured the Hijras very much, but to the Britishers, they were merely the sources of AIDs or HIV, although later Gandhiji blamed Westernization as the reason of it, and further clarified that the Hijras were not at all heterosexual activists.

The well-known Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, is a great chronicler of the *hijras*, who are supposed to be a confused synthesis of male and female beings in one. The episode narrates that when Rama was sent into exile with his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana at the behest of his father, he was followed to the banks of the river at the edge of the forest by his devout subjects. On reaching the shore, he addressed his people, saying: "Men and women, please go back and perform your duties". But when he returned Ayodhya fourteen years later after his victory over Ravana, Rama found a cluster of people still gathered at the same spot. On query of Rama, they told him that since they were neither men nor women, they had felt themselves exempt from Rama's injunction. For such act of exemplary devotion, they were endowed with the blessing of Rama.

In literature the third gender people are popularly known as a *tritiyaprakriti*, which means 'neither man nor woman', and this is a fully satisfactory designation for the *hijras*. The literature of Jains further developed this conception very well distinguishing three deliberate types of sexual

orientations: *striveda* (sexual feelings of a woman), *pumveda* (sexual feelings of a man) and *napumsakaveda* (sexual feelings of a hermaphrodite).

This neglected gender gets nicely explored in the realm of Indian literature in English. Here, first of all, the significant name that strikes one readily in mind is Mahesh Dattani, who is the playwright to write about hijras in his “Seven Steps Around the Fire”. It is the play where the eunuch named Kamala shows the irony of their fates that they celebrate the festivities of matrimony and childbirth, but they themselves can not marry, nor can they give birth to a child. Equally pitiable is Kamala Das’ *The Dance of Eunuchs*, where the eunuchs dance only to forget about their pangs and sufferings. Many other identically same pieces of literature can be cited in this regard.

Transgenderism is also cinematized, as we see Asuthosh Rana in ‘Sangharsh’ as Lajja Shankar Pandey, who is a devotee of Kali and also Sadashiv Amrapurkar as Maharani in ‘Sadak’, where Maharani’s function in the plot is, again, to be the villain—depicted here as an evil brothel owner who tortures and traffics young women. Mention may be made of the legendary film actor, director and lyricist in Indian cinema Rituporno Ghosh. It is a great set back for us that this iconic director, a consummate devotee of Rabindranath Tagore in film industry passed away in 2013; within his short span of life with an age of fifty, he revolutionized the Indian film by his unique film theory, art films and he himself underwent several surgeries to become a model of transgender community. On verge of his death, he gave us *Chitrangada* the art film to memorize for ever.

No less interesting is the exploration of these inter-sexed people about the cultural participation in Indian society. Unlike Western society, where transgenders often keep their lifestyle secret, transgenders in India have an active and celebrated lifestyle. Hijras are unique because they have an active social organization that is both traditional and ritualistic. Hijras earn a living by performing a traditional ceremony which occurs either at marriage occasion or at the post-natal stage of a baby. Surprisingly, these in-between sexed people transcend caste and kinship affiliation, as they come from all cultures of our India may be it Hindu, Muslim and Christian.

4. Representation of Transgender in Social Framework

In multivariate Indian society, one could see that transgenders are occasionally despised and treated with contempt for their lowly approaches of either begging or of dancing. But on many other occasions, they are supposed to have a sanctioned place in Hindu society, especially in weddings, births and festivals, as a recognized ‘third gender’, accommodating gender variation, ambiguity and contradictions. Notably, they have been a visible force, and the part of an organized community through their indefatigable struggle of life. In spite of such supposedly elevated status, reality behind such community is starkly harsh and truly striking. In any part across the country, where the *hijras* or *transgender* people reside, their lives are, in large scale, physically, mentally and emotionally dazed by experiences of shame, dishonor and gruesome violence. In the contemporary scenario of our country, it is not just the ambiguous gender but also the class

determination of the *hijra* community that generates a severe impact on issues which the upper class so conveniently take for granted, such as access to education, job or medical care. While the majority of Indian society and culture hardly pays due importance to them, the *hijras* clan find no other way but to isolate themselves from the mainstream culture, making themselves contented with a sense of integrity, but it also paves a way to their security and safety. This is how the entire third gender community form their own groups and like to situate their dwellings relatively close together, rather within their known circles.

Some successful first transgender people in various peripheries of Indian society can be cited state-wise and profession-wise. Commonly known that education is an enlightenment to all, irrespective of castes, creeds, genders and sexes. In case of higher education, Dr. Manabi Bandopadhyay: India's first transgender college principal at Krishnagar Women's College of West Bengal since June 7, 2015 has been an instance of quick reply to all criticism around the third gendered people. In the field of direct administration, K Prithika Yashini is the first transgender woman to be a police officer in India. She is called the first trans woman sub-inspector in Tamil Nadu, India. Born as a transgender, Shabnam Mausi has taken a tough road in the arena of politics and ministry. She placed her contests in elections from Sohagpur constituency in district Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh. As she was not supported by her family, she wasn't able to attend school, yet her indomitable spirit gets divulged as she learns almost twelve different languages. In terms of law and justice, Sathyasri Sharmila recently became India's first transgender advocate. Despite hailing from Tamil Nadu, a state which has been securing highest literacy rank next to Kerala, she had to undergo inhuman torture and abuse on the account of her gender. "Today, I enrolled my name in the Bar Council of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry and became the first transgender lawyer in India. I have struggled a lot in my life," she told ANI. India's first transgender school, Sahaj International School in Kochi is reported on way to inauguration in Kochi by transgender rights activist and artist Kalki Subramaniam. The first batch will be a trial of comprising ten transgender students who will study under National Open School System.

5. Conclusion

Thus the representation of transgenderism has become an inevitable part of our cultural studies; its ethics and values should not only be preached in our four walled classrooms or on online platform, but also be revered earnestly, as their presence in India can be felt from Kashmir to Kanyakumari either on trainways or on the pavements. Fortunately, the Honourable Supreme Court of India, on 15th April of 2014, issues the famous NASLA Act and recognizes them as Third Gender as well as sanctions quota for them in the fields of education and jobs. But the implementation of those laws remains largely ineffective and discorded. Last but can never be the least, the *hijras* or this third gender should not be stigmatized in any way; rather they should be glorified for their ascetic- like-life style, for their charity (for begging alms), for their sexual renunciation and ultimately for their cultural and literary representation in India.

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