



The Exiled Sex: Centering the Marginalized in Anosh Irani's *The Parcel*

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Abstract

In an effort “to bring the marginalized to the forefront”, on 18th July, 2018, the Sahitya Akademi hosted India’s first “Third Gender Poetry Meet”. The event can be seen to be inaugurating a dialogue that had long been pending between the „marginalized“ and the „mainstream“ as far as gender-representations in the literary world are concerned (Sankalita). This stress on greater inclusion and representation of the „third-gender“ paves the way for writers and researchers to explore the avenues that had heretofore been taken to be outlandish (Mahapatra). Anosh Irani’s *The Parcel* can be studied as a part of this inclusive and broadened perspective towards a sex that has so long remained exiled from the society, art and the academia. The aim of this paper is to analyse Irani’s contribution to the representation of trans character in Indian fiction and to study the various plains of rejection faced by his hijra protagonist in *The Parcel*.

Keywords: alienation, exile, hijra, transgender, homophobia

Meaning „across gender“, transgender as an umbrella term is often used to define myriad gender identities that go against the common understanding of what Michael Warner calls „heteronormative“ (Warner). They may include the transsexuals, butch lesbians, transvestites, drag queens/kings and intersexed people (Cuddon 735). However, the trans identities in the Indian context significantly differ from the West. Hijras in India live not only as a gendered category, but define themselves based on a remarkable socio-historical milieu of culture, mythology and folklore. They have a well-defined kinship system, organized hierarchical structure, induction rituals and at times also a distinct language of their own. They are known by different names in various parts of the Indian subcontinent: Aravani, Aruvani, Ali, Jagappa, Chhakka, Tirunangai or Kinnar. Collectively they are recognized by the Supreme Court of India as the „Third Gender“ (Mahapatra). The Indian mythologist and writer, Devdutt Pattanaik in his book, *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore* writes:

Scholars and activists, who tend to define Hijras as homosexual cross-dressers, transgendered individuals, eunuch transvestites, and male-to-female transsexuals, often overlook the fact that the Hijra are not simply a sexual orientation but also a well-defined social identity. To be Hijra, the crucial step is to take the vow of Hijrahood and become part of the Hijra clan, which almost functions as a caste with its own specific inner workings, rules, ritual, and hierarchy. (24)

Nevertheless acute discrimination and social exclusion is visible in all kinds of trans experiences. Discussing the marginalization that transgender studies faces within the field of queer studies, Susan Stryker says that queer studies is not just “antiheteronormative” but also sometimes perpetuates a kind of “homonormativity”. Stryker notes that while transgender studies is concerned more about the “questions of embodiment and identity”, queer studies often privileges “desire and sexuality” as its primary concern (Stryker 7). Such visible exclusionary tendencies and practices even among the identity theorists, as well as the stereotypical depiction of the different gendered categories in literature and art are now confronted and questioned. In India, the emergence of life-writings by/about the transgender people has also significantly contributed to the evolution and development of their literary representation.

In the chapter, Gender and Sex (Cultural Anthropology), *Lumen Learning* traces the etymology of the word *Hijra* to the Arabic root, *hjr*. It means departure or leaving one’s tribe. Thus, the suggestions of exile are visible in the very name. Exile is also one of the most prominent and recurrent themes in almost all kinds of queer expressions. Eli Clare’s groundbreaking work, *Exile and Pride*, explains the alienation that differently-abled and queer bodies suffer from. He explains how the acceptance from the *dyke* community cannot take away the sense of exile and the longing he feels for home:

I lie when I write that home is being a dyke in dyke community. Rather, home is particular wild and ragged beaches, specific kinds of trees and berry brambles, the exact meander of the river I grew up near, the familiar sounds and sights of a dying logging and fishing town. Exile is the hardest because I have irrevocably lost that place as actual home. (32)

Madhu, the forty year old hijra protagonist of Irani’s *The Parcel*, faces a similar predicament. Having lived most of her life as a sex-worker, she is now reduced to begging to earn her living. All through the novel her yearning and search for home, kinship and identity directs the course of her actions. “I am indeed a migrant, a wanderer. For almost three decades, I have floated through the city’s red-light district like a ghost” she says, describing how exclusion and exile are inevitable aspects of the hijra experience (02). Not only Madhu, Irani’s novel tells the tale of the entire group of the socially exiled hijras, prostitutes and the trafficked young girls in the red light district of Kamathipura, near Mumbai.

They were lonely disciples whose destinies were stitched together by the thread of being born different—and what a life they had made, all runaways landing in each other’s arms. (46)

As the novel begins, Madhu is ordered by Padma Madam, a fierce and hardened brothel owner, to take charge of a ten year old trafficked girl, Kinjal, and to prepare her mentally for prostitution. In the course of fulfilling this assigned duty, Madhu fights numerous dilemmas in her conscience. She has to manipulate the little girl into believing that there is no one waiting for her outside Kamathipura. She has to convince Kinjal that she could never be accepted by her family even if she’s freed and she returns. The irony of Madhu’s situation is evident here, as she hasn’t been able to convince herself of the same fact that her family isn’t going to accept her ever again. She herself has spent her life contemplating the possibility of her return to home and the acceptance by her family.

In a parcel's mind, there was always the pathetic notion that her parents would come looking for her. Madhu too still believed that if she stood on that bridge and spoke to her brother, told him her story, he would remember her. She was disgusted that some part of her still longed for her family. (93)

Madhu also finds some reflection of her own self in the traumatic child. Kinjal reminds her of the ghosts of alienation that had haunted her childhood. Madhu recalls how as a boy in childhood he was rejected by his classmates in school, how nobody befriended him and how they mocked and bullied him. Madhu's resentment is the product of that dismal childhood "when he longed for company or support from the outside world". There was nobody but the company of a stray dog, to whose pungent urine the taste of his later life is compared (54). The use of animal imagery is significant here. It is also found in the earlier sections of the novel, where Madhu says that for the rest of the world, people like her were no better than irritant insects and caged birds (05, 23). Madhu was an outcast in the society consisting well-defined genders of men and women. He was exiled from that gendered human world, left to "grovel" and "make acquaintance with the worms and the weeds" (54). There was no company, no friendship, only rejection and sneers in Madhu's childhood. Even in his family he was considered a disgrace. He had to suffer displacement at his own home, as after the birth of his brother, Madhu did not even have a bed to sleep on and had to move underneath it. Madhu compares Kinjal's sufferings with her own childhood trauma, trying to emulate her father's hard-heartedness in order to control the ten year old.

Madhu had left home in search of freedom and acceptance. However, the belief that she would feel home among the people of her kind soon faded. She was disillusioned, realizing that "she had left home only to fall into the illusion of freedom. The veil had lifted" (158). She could not call the Hijra House a permanent abode for her. The „guru“ could easily trade her „chela“ with any other hijra of another hijra clan or „gharana“. "The sisters she had bonded with had been traded to another guru like cattle" (159). Madhu uses the animal imagery again to suggest how there was never any freedom for them, and how their life was dependent upon the whims and wishes of their gurus, just like domesticated animals.

Hijra House had given her asylum, but it was not her home. She was a patient there, much like Bulbul and the rest of her sisters. Over the years they had stood outside, like clothes on a laundry line, hoping that the wind would take them away, whisk them to a better future. They were delusional. (209)

Further, the sense of displacement is experienced by Madhu even within her own body. The psychosomatic discord is the most prominent reason for the identity crisis that she suffers from. It is to be noted here, that a significant section of most of the works written on trans subjects can be seen as body narratives, where the trans character often sees the biologically assigned sex organs as "dreadful deformity" and wishes to get rid of them (Benjamin 46). Madhu had distanced herself from her body, "denied it the care it so desperately needed", considering it "the enemy" (Irani 111). She felt "trapped in the wrong body" (139). Thus, Madhu is never feels home even at once, neither in family nor in society and above all, not even in her own body.

Once she is rejected by the mother she had spent years thinking about, the possible home of Madhu's imagination is demolished for ever. In course of the novel, even Gurumai dies.

Gurumai was closest to what Madhu could identify as her guardian. After her death there is hardly any kinship left in Madhu's life. There is no one but Gajja, the only man to have genuinely loved and cared for her. She respects him like no one else. Also, it is because of Kinjal, the parcel of the story, that for the first time in years, Madhu dreams of liberating the caged bird that she was. She finds a reflection of her own latent longings and hopes in Kinjal. Thus, it is in Gajja and Kinjal that she finds her family; she finds the completeness and belongingness she had desired her entire life. In and through them Madhu finds her final solace and redemption.

This man was hers. Let him rest, he had earned it. This child too...For ages, Madhu had tried to embrace womanhood, but her desperation made her stumble and she had become a pathetic parody. In this moment, Gajja and the parcel had made her complete...She was with her family. (183)

Irani presents Madhu's journey not only as an oppressed character, but as an individual undergoing psychological development all through the novel. The disappointments and dilemmas are detailed with complete precision to bring out Madhu as an empathetic and thinking human character. She is able to overcome the wrongs the society had inflicted upon her. And finally, she redeems herself of the cruelties she had inflicted upon the parcels out of resentment. In saving Kinjal, Madhu rescues herself. She makes innocence prevail over atrocity. In this context, Madhu can be compared to Khushwant Singh's Bhagmati in his semi-historical novel, *Delhi: A Novel*. Bhagmati and Madhu are both hijra sex-workers, sacrificing themselves in order to save innocence. But Singh's portrayal is often taken to be problematic and somewhat homophobic in nature. The difference lies in perspective of the two writers. Singh's Bhagmati plays a very significant part in the action of the novel, yet she never achieves individuality as a character. Singh and his protagonist vividly describe the sex-appeal of Bhagmati, overlooking the aspect that makes her a brave character that she proves to be in the end. In fact, critics have often accused Singh of perpetuating the homophobic notions of the society through Bhagmati and the other queer characters in the novel. Bhagmati plays a central role in the novel, yet remains in the margins throughout. The achievement of Irani lies in the fact that he has managed to weave his entire tale around a doubly marginalized character: Madhu is not only a hijra, but a hijra sex-worker. In centring the marginalized, Irani has managed to break through the conventionalities of gender, sex and sexuality. His novel can be seen as an attempt to create a space for the alienated and the exiled sex, at least in the Indian literary scene. And it is visible how the trans character has evolved from Khushwant Singh's Bhagmati to Anosh Irani's Madhu.

Despite the persistent LGBTQ protests against art, film and media culture that produces problematic images of their gender and identity, such issues mostly remain underemphasized. Much might have been said, written and researched upon homosexuality as queerness, but transgender studies still remains the relatively lesser explored domain. In his foreword to A. Revathi's *Our Lives, Our Words*, Gautam Bhan, a famous LGBTQ rights activist writes:

Stories and myths abound...Underneath these stories lies our own need to manage, explain and distance ourselves from visible sexual difference and a gender identity that doesn't fit within easy labels of "male" and "female". In these stories, hijras have

no voices, names, families, or histories. They don't love, they aren't happy or sad, they have no political visions or individual quirks. They are invisible. (viii)

The erstwhile invisible stories are now making themselves visible through the autobiographies by the transgender people and activists. Living Smile Vidya and A. Revathi are the most significant names in such attempts at self-reflection and self-representation. Vidya asserts her demand for inclusion on humanitarian grounds, as she says: "We need to belong, just as the rest of humanity need to belong. What can we do when we do not have a wall to lean on, when we can't find a place to stay?" (Vidya 131). Anosh Irani attempts to make visible one such story through his fiction. Irani's novel makes him a significant part of the group of writers trying to deconstruct the homophobic and „heteronormative“ representations in art, cinema and society. *The Parcel* can be seen as a part of this movement aiming to mainstream the marginalized and contribute to the evolving representation of the transgenders in literature, culture and the academia.

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