

Eunuchs establishing identity through Indian Narratives

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Abstract

Eunuchs are a unique social group of the society who face multiple obstacles in societies across the globe, primarily due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Transgender has been pushed to the margins over the years. In fact, it's a rather gray area of the society as this group is misrepresented, and oftentimes, others fail to understand the subculture that exists within their communities and the problems they face.

Eunuchs are given a homogenous social identity, irrespective of their physical or endocrine status. They are considered infertile persons, with a female gender identity, and masculine secondary sexual characteristics. They were called '*Tritiya Prakriti*' in the ancient times, and used to enjoy a niche position, but with the advent of colonialism this community was thrown on the verge of identity crisis. While the sexual identity of eunuchs is considered homosexual by the general public, no work has been done to assess their sexual orientation or endocrine status.

In recent years there has been a notable increase of interest in the subject of eunuchs. Studies have ranged from general overviews of the eunuch in history, to specific investigations, to edited collections, and individual articles. These narratives have brought a considerable change in the attitude of people towards eunuchs. They have helped to quench the thirst of their identity and fetch them a respectable position in the society.

The objective of this paper will be to unravel the secret and the hidden truth of the life of eunuchs through Indian narratives. My work is going to study how eunuchs have been portrayed in writing, in popular cinema, and in serious cinema. What contribution these narratives have made in the upliftment of the marginalized community, and how these narratives are breaking the subaltern status of this ostracized class.

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Eunuchs or *hijras*, we all must have often come across them in a busy market demanding money from the shopkeepers. They usually come in a group of four or five dressed in saris, and over the top makeup, drawing our attention through their peculiar behavior. But who are these eunuchs? How many of us have ever given them a thought? According to the Merriam Webster dictionary eunuchs are castrate men, in charge of a harem or employed as a chamberlain in a palace. But in the Indian concept eunuchs are born, and not made. In popular belief eunuchs are the genderless people, who are born without a distinct sex organ. Eunuchs are given a homogenous sexual identity, irrespective of their physical or endocrine status. But among these eunuchs, many of them are castrated, few are born hermaphrodite, that is born with genitals of both male and female and few are transvestites, that is, a female mind trapped in a male body or a male mind trapped in a female body. They are described as '*Tritiya Prakriti*': people of the

third sex in the Vedic literature. This suggests, they are present in our society since Vedic time. But in contrast to the present day they used to enjoy a better position in the society during that era. They were considered an integral part of the society like all other individuals and creatures.

There are layers of secrets hidden behind their faces which cannot be unveiled so easily. Up till now the popular literature has done little to change the clichéd perception of eunuchs. But in recent time some serious work has been done for the betterment of their position.

Eunuchs are a unique social group of the society who face multiple obstacles in societies across the globe, primarily due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Transgender has been pushed to the margins over the years. In fact, it's a rather gray area of the society for this group is misrepresented, and oftentimes, others fail to understand the subculture that exists within their communities and the problems they face. The Sanskrit term "*Tritiya Prakriti*," or third nature, is used to classify them. They are considered infertile persons, with a female gender identity, with masculine secondary sexual characteristics, with or without male external genitalia, with the feminine gender role, with predominantly homosexual identity. While the sexual identity of eunuchs is considered homosexual by the general public, no work has been done to assess their sexual orientation or endocrine status.

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change in the attitude of people towards eunuchs. They have helped to quench the thirst of their identity and fetch them a respectable position in the society.

Hijras and *kinnars* of India use mythological narratives in identity-formation. Mythological and literary narratives play a significant role in explaining and legitimizing behavioral patterns, ritual practices, and anatomical forms that are specific to *hijras*, and removing some of the stigma surrounding this identity.

Hijras in contemporary India exist outside of mainstream society due to their perceived 'deviancy'. They fail to fulfill the hetero normative female and male gender roles. It is therefore important for *hijras* to draw upon and use certain narratives to legitimize their behavioral patterns and bodies. Sacred texts and narratives grant sanction to *hijra* existence and alleviate their subordinate position in society. Myths of gender changing individuals, stories associated with Bahuchara Mata (the main goddess with whom the *hijras* identify), and discussion of people of a 'third' nature in ancient texts form part of a cultural canon, through which both *hijras* and non-*hijras* conceptualize the *hijra* subject.

Hijras suffer extreme discrimination, forming marginalized communities, who remain separate from mainstream social communities in terms of lives, experiences, and narratives. Narratives thus serve an important function in the formation of *hijra* identity. *Hijras* use narratives in innovative ways in order to explain and justify their status and ritual role in contemporary Indian society.

The use of ‘sacred’ or ‘ancient narratives’ defends the legitimacy of *hijra* identity. *Hijra* identity might not necessarily be legitimated exclusively through the use of sacred and ancient narratives, given that such narratives themselves posit *hijra* identity in relation to hetero normative gender presentations, explaining away ‘abnormality’ or ‘deviancy’. However, despite the limitations of such narratives, *hijras* do actively employ and interpret them in the construction of their identity, as a mode through which to explain and sanction their existence.

Hijras trace their origins to myths in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Rama, while leaving for the forest upon being banished from the kingdom for fourteen years, turns around to his followers and asks all the ‘men and women’ to return to the city. Among his followers the hijras alone do not feel bound by this direction and decide to stay with him. Impressed with their devotion, Rama sanctions them the power to confer blessings on people on auspicious occasions like childbirth and marriage, and also at inaugural functions. This set the stage for the custom of *badhai* in which hijras sing, dance and confer blessings.

The legend in the Mahabharata is that Aravan, the son of Arjuna and Nagakanya, offers to be sacrificed to Goddess Kali to ensure the victory of the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war. The only condition that he made was to spend the last night of his life in matrimony. Since no woman was willing to marry one who was doomed to be killed, Krishna assumes the form of a beautiful woman called Mohini and marries him. The *hijras* of Tamil Nadu consider Aravan their progenitor and call themselves aravanis.

In the epic Mahabharata, at the end of the period of exile of twelve years, the Pandava princes had to undergo *agyatvas* for a year. During this period, Arjuna was turned into a eunuch, according to a curse given by Urvashi, for a period of one year, which he passed as *Brihannala*.

The Mahabharata has many more instances involving eunuchs. During the epic war, Bhishma, acted as the *senapati* of the kauravas. The Pandavas could not win the war until the mighty warrior was defeated. This was achieved through *Shikhandi*, a transgendered man, as Bhishma had vowed not to pick weapons before a woman.

In *shaiva* mythology, lord *shiva* is considered to have the form of *Ardhanarishvara*, in which the left half of his body is female. *Shiva-Ardhanarishvara* represents the divine hermaphrodite and Vishnu-Mohini, the divine transsexual.

There are many legends associated with Bahuchara Mata. In one of the many folk stories associated with Bahuchara Mata, the Goddess was once a princess who castrated her husband because he preferred going to the forest and behave as a woman instead of coming to her bridal bed. In another story, a man who attempted to molest Bahuchara Mata was cursed with impotence. He was forgiven only after he gave up his masculinity, dressed as a woman, and worshipped the Goddess.

Contemporary fictional and non-fictional literature has also brought about a big change in the status of *hijras*. These narratives have enlightened the world by bringing forth the gloomy

and struggling life of this marginalized class. Cool Cut, a novel by Sharad P. Paul and A. Revathi's autobiography has depicted two different, but true aspects of *hijra* making. Both these works justify the crude and unpleasant behavior of *hijras* and somewhere evokes our sympathies. We feel offended by the immodest behavior of *hijras* and often chide them for begging, but have we ever given it a thought what makes them behave in such a manner. They do not conform to the societal norms of gender; they do not follow the binaries of male and female and that is why they are denied of the right to live a normal life. They are not allowed to work normally as we do.

Dr. Sharad P. Paul's novel 'Cool Cut' narrates the story of Raman, who loves flying kites and wants to become a tailor. When he on his way to Madras, he is abducted by *hijras* and is made one of them. When he gains consciousness, other *hijras* celebrate his nirvana and perform his naming ceremony. They wear white sari and put turmeric on their skin to perform his naming ritual. They put lit candles at his feet, burn camphor and chant a prayer. He is renamed Ramani, "the adopted daughter of Lord *Ganesha*."

The leader of the group who had kidnapped Ramani considers herself as an adoptive mother of her girls and justifies her kidnapping and mutilating of teenagers by arguing that eunuchs are necessary, and possess magic powers. Another character in the novel suggests that eunuchs must kidnap because they cannot reproduce, and if they do not have younger dependents like themselves, they will have no security in old age.

Autobiography by A. Revathi presents a totally different aspect of making of a *hijra*. It can be considered a milestone in transgender literature as this is the first ever book written by a *hijra* herself. Up till now a lot has been written about *hijras* but none of those were written by a *hijra* or anyone who has a direct connection to the community. In many of the works on *hijras*, the words of the community members are heavily filtered and interpreted by academics. Revathi was born into a working class family in Tamil Nadu. The youngest of three brothers, she was born as Doraisamy. From a very young age, she enjoyed the tasks that were assigned to her sister more than her brothers. She longed to be a girl as long back as she remembers. She feels like a woman trapped in a man's body. All she wanted was to be a woman, to be considered a woman by society. Slowly, getting more and more aware of herself, she meets up with others like her. Her quest to be a woman leads her to a totally different life; a life where she is taunted for her state of being, where she is not accepted by her birth family, and yet she finds a family of her own. She runs away to Delhi in search of a life where she can be herself. All is not rosy there either. She faces trouble and violence of all sorts.

All she wants is to live a life being true to her, with a little dignity, to be accepted for what she is but that itself seems like a tall order.

It is an honest autobiography, which depicts life as a *hijra* in India. A community that is feared, ridiculed and ill-treated in so many ways. What can a person do when everything seems to be stacked against them? It is a peek into lives of our sexual minorities who have struggled so

hard to gain acceptance, ill-treated by society, by the law enforcers, shackled by our archaic laws, looked down by their own families, no means of earning a living... is it a wonder that they have to resort to all sorts of things to keep themselves alive?

Hijras have also found a place in cinema, but only as a comic relief. They are mostly portrayed as comic characters, clapping hands in their typical style and singing in hoarse and gruff voice. They are mostly seen as teasing the heroine or the villain with lewd remarks and gestures. They are generally shown as buffoons and objects of ridicule. In mainstream Hindi cinema, eunuchs have so far existed more as clowns than humans with hearts. During the period from mid 50s to mid 60s, eunuchs were generally shown as companions to heroines, similar to those of queens in harems. Some of the cast, either lowly rated comedians or even lead actors, would cross dress with deliberate crudity, so as not to be mistaken for women, but be clearly identifiable as eunuchs, in an attempt to evoke laughter. Such movies were entertaining to watch, but they were far from fair treatment of eunuchs?

It was the late comedian Mehmood who, for the first time, represented eunuchs in a respectable manner in his blockbuster 'Kunwara Baap'. He used real eunuchs for a song and dance number in this movie. After the 1991, the scenario changed a little bit. Some serious movie makers started representing eunuchs as normal human beings and not as clowns. Movie maker Mahesh Bhatt presented actor Sadashiv Amrapurkar as 'Maharani', a eunuch who was the lead villain of the movie 'Sadak'. Amrapurkar was awarded Filmfare for the role, but the role did

little to improve the image of eunuchs in society, since Maharani in *Sadak* came across as a vile, inhuman specimen. Mahesh Bhatt again showed the courage to raise a serious issue and made the much appreciated ‘Tamanna’, based on the actual life of a eunuch, ‘Tiku’. Despite being a eunuch, the character of Tiku comes out as a more manly character than those who are genetically born as men. They may be physical embodiments of manhood, but in their hearts and souls, they are not man enough to do their duties. Tiku was more of a man than all the men put together. As he refuses to adopt the *hijra* ways, he had to bear the taunts of his own community, in addition to the harassment by ‘normal’ folk.

Kalpana Lajmi’s ‘Darmiyan’ was a brave effort, which was based on the relationship of a mother, an actor by profession and her eunuch child. The roles were effectively portrayed by Kirron Kher and the late Nirmal Pandey.

In recent times, movies like ‘Shabnam Mausi’ and ‘Welcome to Sajjanpur’ were landmark films, in the sense that they showed eunuchs as clean politicians, mirroring real life incidents of eunuchs winning elections. It is a common feeling that the whole political class is corrupt. The cause of this corruption is greed, to provide all the facilities of the world to near and dear ones. On the contrary, eunuchs who do not have families to feed or children to support, can be very good politicians, devoid of any lust or greed.

‘Queens! Destiny of Dance’ is a movie that portrays the real aspects of the *hijra* community. The movie features actor Seema Biswas and eunuch Laxmi Narayan Tripathi in pivotal roles.

While sympathy towards eunuchs in Bollywood is a recent phenomenon, Hollywood has always been more sympathetic to the community. Movies like ‘Between the Lines - India’s Third Gender’, ‘India’s Ladyboys’, ‘Bombay Eunuch’, ‘Butterfly Sword’, ‘Eunuch of Western Palace’, ‘Harem’, ‘Better than Chocolate’, ‘Big City Blue’, ‘Buffalo Girls’, ‘Just Like a Woman’, ‘Lai Shi’, ‘China’s Last Eunuch’, ‘The Half Naked Truth’ etc. portrayed the cause of eunuchs and TG/TS people in a far more sensitive way.

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