
Invisible Lives: Exploring Social Exclusion of Transgender Characters in the novel *Cut Like Wound*

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Abstract:

This research explores the intricate portrayal of transgender identity in Anita Nair's novel *Cut Like Wound*, emphasising the concept of social exclusion. According to Walker (1997), social exclusion is a process through which individuals, groups, or communities experience marginalisation across social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Such exclusion perpetuates discrimination and impedes these groups' full participation in mainstream society. The narrative focuses on a transgender character who faces marginalisation due to their gender identity. Using a queer theory framework, this study analyses how the novel depicts the systemic barriers and personal struggles faced by transgender individuals. It demonstrates how Bhuvana's experiences highlight the widespread stigmatisation and invisibility encountered by transgender people in both personal and societal contexts. The research provides insights into the broader implications of gender identity and contributes to contemporary discussions on social exclusion. Through thoroughly examining theoretical perspectives with character, this study emphasises the novel's role in shedding light on the realities of marginalised individuals. It critiques how fiction can reveal the lived experiences of those on society's periphery.

Keywords: Social exclusion, Marginalisation, Gender identity, Transgender, Discrimination.**Introduction:**

Social exclusion is a powerful form of discriminatory practice that refers to the process and outcome of keeping a social group outside the power centre and resources. In human development, exclusion has taken the form of segregating a group from the social, political, economic, cultural, educational and religious domains of societal life, culminating

in a system of domination and subjugation. Similarly, Duffy defines "social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and some characterisations of alienation and distance from mainstream society" (Duffy, 1995). Social exclusion in society is seen among the groups of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Women and LGBT people (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) and these groups are marginalised and used to face discrimination, subordination and exploitation. Among all marginalised groups, LGBT individuals are the most sufferers and among them transgender people are the most vulnerable marginalised group. This group has faced discrimination, poverty and oppression from society and is regarded as one of the most marginalised. They are burdened with a stigma of impurity and often endure various forms of abuse and disrespect. Factors contributing to their exclusion and discrimination include social stigmas, low levels of education, poverty, unemployment, and the prevalence of low-status and underpaid jobs.

Therefore, the challenges they face are significantly greater. In India, although policymakers have focused on marginalised groups such as women, tribes and lower caste people, they have largely neglected the transgender community, particularly hijras (eunuchs). While hijras are a specific category within the transgender community, the term "hijra" is frequently used in India to refer to transgender individuals in general. Hijras are castrated men or hermaphrodites. In India, hijra represents a third gender role encompassing aspects of both male and female identities, rather than being strictly one or the other. According to Sibsankar Mal, "Hijras are physiological males who have a feminine gender identity, adopt a feminine gender role, and wear women's clothing. They do not conform to conventional notions of male or female gender but combine or move between them" (Agrawal 1997). Hijras may look like males in physical form but act and dress up like females, supporting the notion that a female soul exists within a male body. Hence, the mismatch between hijras' gender identity and societal norms leads to their exclusion from mainstream society.

Historical Presence and Status of Hijras in India:

Transgender individuals have been a part of Indian society for centuries. Ancient Indian texts provide historical evidence of the recognition of a "third sex" who do not conform to the traditional notion of male or female gender categories. In ancient times, transgender individuals were honoured participants in significant ceremonies such as weddings and childbirth. They were regarded with a divine status, with their blend of male and female traits leading people to believe the gods sent them. In Hinduism, it is prohibited to mistreat transgender people due to the fear of incurring divine displeasure. Consequently, they were often given substantial money and ceremonial gifts to ensure their goodwill and blessings for the events.

Sanskrit, one of the world's oldest languages, has three terms for gender: male, female, and gender-neutral ("tritiyaprakriti"). This indicates that addressing transgender individuals was ordinary in ancient times. Furthermore, Indian literature, originating around four thousand years ago, includes numerous mythologies. These mythologies reflect the study of people's experiences conveyed through stories and rituals.

In the Ramayana, when Lord Rama departs from Ayodhya for his fourteen-year exile, his subjects accompany him into the forest. He instructs everyone, both men and women, to return to their homes. Upon his return to Ayodhya after the exile, he discovers that the hijras, who are neither men nor women, have stayed behind. Admiring their steadfastness, Lord Rama grants them the privilege of bestowing blessings at important events such as weddings and childbirth.

In the Mahabharata, Aravan, the son of Arjuna and Ulupi (a serpent princess), was to be sacrificed to Goddess Kali to secure the Pandavas' victory in the Kurukshetra war. The condition for this sacrifice was that Aravan must spend his final night as a married man. Fearing the prospect of becoming his widow, no woman agreed to marry him. Consequently, Lord Krishna assumed the form of Mohini and married Aravan.

During the Mughal period and the Ottoman Empire, Hijras held a prominent role in the royal courts of the Islamic world. They attained prominent roles as political advisors, administrators, generals, and custodians of the harems. Hijras were regarded as intelligent, reliable, and intensely loyal, and they had unrestricted access to various areas and segments of society, making them key players in the politics of empire-building during the Mughal era. Their duties were varied, including guarding the palaces, acting as messengers, and entertaining the royal women with their music, dance, and humour. They had regular responsibilities and lived among ordinary people. They guided state decisions and were given substantial sums for being closest to the kings and queens.

As the Mughal Empire declined and British rule began, their influence diminished. From a colonial perspective, transgender individuals were seen as a public nuisance that threatened the very fabric of society. The British administrators labelled them as criminals. The administrators stripped hijras of their primary sources of income and any form of rights, driving them into poverty and social marginalisation. Moreover, numerous regulations were enacted to criminalise the hijra community and deny them their rights. According to Michelraj, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, hijras who were involved in kidnapping and castrating children, as well as those who dressed as women to perform dances in public, were included in this classification as criminals.

Theoretical analysis - Queer theory:

Queer tradition challenges fundamental ideas about gender identities, promoting a diverse and unrestricted exploration of cultural phenomena. Queer theory supports the notion that

sexual preferences, gender expressions, and related identities along with their classification as 'normal' or 'deviant' have paved the way for a more sophisticated critique of established views on sex and gender. Queer theorists argue that identities are fluid and composed of multiple elements, making it incorrect to define a person by just a single characteristic. They critique the practice of categorising individuals based on gender, suggesting that queer theory questions the notion of gender as an inherent aspect of the self. This theory draws significant influence from the works of scholars such as Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, David Halperin, Jose Esteban Munoz, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Judith Butler is arguably the most prominent theorist to examine sexual and gender identity as a form of social performance. "To what extent," she asks, "do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person?" (*Gender Trouble* 16). In contrast to these normalised regulatory practices, she developed a concept of performativity, which she set apart from a traditional performance model. According to Butler, performance presumes a subject, but performativity contests the very notion of the subject.

Butler argues that gender and sexual identity have always been shaped by performance in alignment with social norms and myths, which are influenced by philosophy, religion, medicine, and culture. In *History of Sexuality* (1976), Michel Foucault asserted that sexuality became embedded in a discourse aimed at identifying and controlling various forms of sexual behaviour. "Under the authority of a language that had been carefully expurgated so that it was no longer directly named, sex was taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no respite" (20). Foucault's concept of sexuality revealed the ideological mechanisms through which institutional authorities uphold and control sexual identities.

Theorists view queer theory as an approach to examining various types of sexual desire and how cultural definitions shape them. Queer theorists challenge conventional definitions of sex and gender, arguing that there are no clear-cut distinctions between male and female. Queer theory holds an essential position in literary criticism because it deconstructs and redefines gender theories.

Discussion

The novel is set during the Ramadan festival and spans 38 days, concluding on St. Mary's Day. This study focuses on the transgender character Bhuvana. Initially, Bhuvana is depicted as a criminal under the alias Chikka, who is introduced as the younger brother of a corrupt corporator. As the narrative unfolds, it is revealed that Chikka is a transgender individual named Bhuvana. This paper explores Bhuvana's transformative journey from Chikka to her true self. As the text says, "In the mirror, he saw himself as the woman the

goddess wished him to be" (CLW 4), Bhuvana embraces her female identity. She delights in her new self, stating, "Now he was the woman he wished to be, and he knew again that wave of pure delight. I am she! I am her! I am the most beautiful woman I know" (CLW 4). Bhuvana emerges from her male body, manifesting her feminine soul, and experiences profound satisfaction and confidence in her identity. She adopts female attire and navigates the world as Bhuvana, finding greater comfort and self-fulfillment in her female identity than her previous male persona.

However, society fails to recognise her identity as a woman due to the entrenched social construction of traditional gender norms. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (1990) argues that gender is not an inherent reality but rather a construct shaped by societal norms. This perspective suggests that our comprehension of gender identity and its distinctions is significantly influenced and reinforced by social factors. Consequently, according to traditional Indian gender norms, heterosexual individuals are deemed privileged members of society, while those who deviate from conventional gender roles or identify as homosexual are often stigmatized. This marginalisation arises because nonconforming genders and homosexuals do not conform to the traditional societal expectations of gender. In an article by Varsha Sharma, Arun Kumar Poonia (2023) states, "The Indian Society, firstly, holds heterogeneity as a standard norm for both men and women. The society punishes any deviation from this position, and those who believe in the concept of homosexuality are seen as deviant and abnormal". As a result, transgender individuals who deviate from traditional gender norms often face substantial and severe challenges in their interactions with society. Those who do not conform to heterosexual norms are frequently marginalised, with transgender individuals experiencing particularly pronounced forms of exclusion. This marginalisation often leaves them unable to meet basic needs and participate fully in societal activities. The resultant social exclusion leads to significant isolation, as transgender individuals are systematically excluded from mainstream social, economic, and political spheres. This exclusionary process underscores the profound difficulties faced by transgender individuals in achieving social integration and accessing essential resources.

Gender identity and gender are constructed by society, as Michel Foucault argued that "sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience that has historical, social, and cultural, rather than biological, origins" (Spargo, 1999, p. 12). Similarly, Butler says that "gender is a social construction that imposes traits on people based on their assigned sex" (Butler 1990). According to Butler, society views gender and sex as constructed categories rather than natural categories. Thus, Bhuvana's identity is not recognised by society when she tries to protect herself as an ordinary woman to the passerby in the streets of Shivaji Nagar, she encounters another interloper mocking at

her identity.

The interloper laughed. A high, shrill laugh. 'He thinks you are a woman.'

Tears welled up in her eyes. Then she pulled herself together and said through clenched teeth, 'Why do you say that? I am a woman, can't you see?'

"He's right. You are a fucking eunuch." (CLW 10)

This study investigates how social exclusion contributes to Bhuvana's psychological instability and subsequent extreme behaviours. Bhuvana undergoes significant emotional and psychological distress due to the insults she endures, which culminates in an intense rage. This overwhelming anger drives her to commit the act of murdering the interloper, ultimately leading her to become a serial killer. She targets individuals who reject her female identity and objectify her for sexual pleasure. In this research paper, Bhuvana's acts of murder are examined as manifestations of her emotional instability and psychological turmoil. This instability and turmoil are traced to the lack of recognition, marginalisation, and social exclusion she experiences.

Conclusion:

The paper concludes by asserting that transgender individuals face social exclusion and societal humiliation due to their bodies challenging traditional binary gender classifications and failing to conform to established societal expectations. The social constructs of gender and sex are, therefore, seen as fabrications, given that gender is fluid, flexible, and subject to change. As Butler (1990) posits, "Gender is a fluid attribute that can change based on a given context." By presenting theoretical evidence, the paper advocates for reevaluating gender constructs. Initially, gender is recognised as inherently fluid and mutable, given its status as a social construct. Consequently, there are no fixed roles assigned to any particular gender. Moreover, as Butler (1990) explains, "Gender is about performativity, which means the repeated gender-normative actions that create and signify a person's gender." Thus, gender is constructed through repeated actions, expressions, and behaviours, rather than by adhering to societal norms. According to Butler, performativity originates from an internal essence authentically expressed through bodily actions (Butler 1990). Therefore, transgender individuals should be acknowledged based on their performative acts rather than their physical appearance. Instead of marginalising them, society should strive to create an inclusive environment that supports their existence without discrimination.

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