



Representation of Transgender as a Theme in the Select Works of Indian and English Literature

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Abstract: The third gender, particularly transgender individuals, remains largely misunderstood by mainstream society due to deep-rooted taboos and a lack of open discourse. Often marginalized, they are viewed with contempt and prejudice by cisgender individuals, who perceive them as deviating from prevailing gender norms. Rather than acknowledging their lived realities, society frequently dismisses them as a masquerade—people in disguise or cross-dressing—rather than recognizing their authentic identities. A key factor behind the violence and discrimination faced by hijras is society's inability to accept non-binary identities that challenge rigid gender divisions. Rooted in patriarchal structures, societal expectations dictate strict gender roles, making it difficult for those who do not conform to traditional masculinity or femininity to find acceptance. This aligns with Judith Butler's concept of 'gender performativity,' which suggests that gender is not an inherent identity but a set of repeated behaviours imposed by society. By failing to acknowledge gender as fluid and socially constructed, conservative norms continue to marginalize and oppress transgender individuals. The representation of transgender identities in literature varies significantly between Indian English writing and Western authors, reflecting cultural, historical, and political contexts. Western literature is often shaped by medicalized transition narratives and queer theory. While both traditions highlight themes of marginalization, gender identity, and self-discovery, their approaches reflect the cultural, historical, and political realities of their respective societies.

Keywords: Transgender, Prejudice, Masquerade, Patriarchy, Queer Theory, Binary-Identities, Cisgender, Marginalization.

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INTRODUCTION

[1]. Transgender representation in literature has long served as a mirror of society's engagement with gender variance and identity. While Western critical theory often frames transgender narratives as

resistance to binaries, Indian traditions show a much older cultural engagement with gender fluidity. From mythological epics to contemporary fiction and autobiographies, both Indian and English literary works have explored transgender identities—

¹ A transgender (often shortened to trans) person has a gender identity different from that typically

associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

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sometimes symbolically, sometimes directly—reflecting not only the struggles of marginalization but also the assertion of dignity and agency. This article examines the portrayal of transgender characters in select works of Indian and English literature, showing how they destabilize gender binaries, reclaim social space, and enrich literary discourse.

‘When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is, ‘male or female?’ and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty.’ - (Sigmund Freud: *Femininity*)

Legal Framework of Transgender Rights in India

The legal framework governing transgender rights in India is primarily shaped by the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India (NALSA)*, 2014. In this historic decision, the Court affirmed the right of transgender individuals to self-identify their gender as male, female, or transgender, independent of medical procedures or certification. The *NALSA* judgment significantly expanded the interpretation of fundamental rights under the Constitution, particularly by recognizing the right to equality and non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity. It laid the foundation for the inclusion of gender identity and sexual orientation within the ambit of constitutionally protected rights. Subsequent rulings by the Supreme Court have further reinforced and broadened these protections, affirming the rights and dignity of individuals across the *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual*. To give complete statutory effect to the principles laid down in *NALSA*, the Parliament brought the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, accompanied by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2020. This legislation aims to safeguard transgender persons from discrimination, ensure access to welfare schemes, and recognize their right to self-perceived gender identity, while also outlining procedures for legal recognition and access to various rights and entitlements.

Legislation under Constitution of India, 1950

The Constitution of India is the founding document in which all the rights and protections for each individual are provided and Part III of the Constitution contains the fundamental rights. Article 14 guarantees equality and equal protection of the law and Article 15 (1) prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. The Supreme Court for the first time in 2014 in its decision in the case of *National Legal Services*

Authority Vs. Union of India (“*NALSA*”) interpreted the ground of ‘sex’ under Article 15 (1) to include the terms gender and gender identity. The court held that Article 15(1) would include prohibition of non-discrimination on the ground of gender identity and sexual orientation as well. This was a watershed moment for transgender rights, as the Supreme Court held that all persons have the right under the constitution to self-determine their own gender identity and this right is protected under the right to equality guaranteed under Articles 14 and 15 (1). The right to freedom of expression under Article 19 (1) (a) and Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees the right to life and autonomy were also expanded to include the right to express one’s gender identity and gender expression. Thereafter in *Navtej Johar and Others v. Union of India* in its landmark decision decriminalising consensual same-sex relationships in India. The Supreme Court upheld the right to decisional autonomy and the freedom to decide one’s sexual orientation and choice of partner. The constitutional jurisprudence that has emerged from these landmark decisions has laid the foundation for the protection of transgender rights and have been significant in shaping the judicial discourse on the constitutional rights of the transgender persons.

The representation of transgender identities in literature varies significantly between Indian English writing and Western authors, reflecting cultural, historical, and political contexts. In Indian English literature, transgender representation has been shaped by the country’s socio-religious history, particularly the presence of [2], *hijras*, a traditional third-gender community recognized in Hindu mythology and colonial history. Since antiquity, hijras have a recorded history in the Indian subcontinent as per the Kama Sutra. When Britishers took control of the country in the nineteenth century, cross-dressing was criminalized, eunuchs were persecuted and criminalised under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1860 and in 1871 labelled them criminal tribe. *The Sexual Offences Act 1967*, an act of Parliament in United Kingdom legalised homosexuality, and it took India exactly 51 years to do so. In 2018 on 6th September, the Supreme Court of India in a remarkable judgement ruled that Section 377 was unconstitutional and revoked Section 377 which criminalized homosexuality. India maintained this conservative attitude even after the British rule and is largely intolerant if not openly hostile toward homosexual and transgender citizens.

² is a culture-specific identity found in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal. It is often cited

as a separate identity from man and woman, and also separate from the concept of transgender.

"Women are not born, they are made", are the famous words of [3]. Simone de Beauvoir. The same logic applies to men also. We often witness how parents respond to a baby boy crying, saying not to cry like a girl, be a man, etc. These types of examples are a general practice in any household so it can be said that it's a conscious as well as an unconscious choice of the parents. The idea that a girl child should play with dolls and boys should play with toys like a car or machines are ingrained in the child's mind by the parents themselves. In India, transgenders³ are known as the 'third gender.' They are known as neither men nor women. Serena Nanda, Professor of Anthropology in New York, based her ethnography on the context and lives of hijras in India, and in her work *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* establishes them as the 'third gender'. *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* written by Zia Jaffrey is an eccentric record of an odyssey through India in search of a marginalized community of transsexuals and eunuchs. Through this book, Jaffrey takes us on a journey to India to investigate why the hijras are considered taboo, and who they are. Her insightful analysis of the lives, rituals and cultural history of hijras raises many questions and sheds light on a subject never before considered a 'subject'.

Transgender Representation in Indian Literature

In the *Mahabharata*, the character of Shikhandi represents one of the earliest literary depictions of transgender identity. Born as Amba and reborn as Shikhandi, this figure transitions from female to male through divine intervention. The epic states: "*I was born a woman, but became a man through divine grace. Today, I shall fight as a warrior.*" This narrative not only recognizes gender fluidity but also situates a transgender figure at the center of a pivotal battle. Shikhandi's role in Bhishma's death demonstrates that Indian epics acknowledged non-binary identities within sacred and heroic frameworks.

In Arundhati Roy's novel, *Anjum*, a hijra living in Delhi, becomes a central character whose life narrative foregrounds transgender experience. Roy writes: "*She wasn't a man; she wasn't a woman. She was a union of the two, a living, breathing argument against the binary.*" (Roy 2017, p. 28). By making a hijra the narrative's anchor, Roy decenters heteronormative voices and foregrounds marginalized perspectives. Anjum's struggles and resilience symbolize both the vulnerabilities and strengths of the transgender community in contemporary India.

Autobiographical writing has also been crucial in authentic representation. In *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, the activist-author declares: "*I am not ashamed of what I am. The world may see me as incomplete, but I know I am whole.*" (Tripathi 2015, p. 64). By reclaiming wholeness, Laxmi resists societal stigma, offering a narrative of empowerment rather than victimhood. Her autobiography provides an insider's perspective into hijra identity, tradition, and activism, thereby enriching Indian transgender literature with lived experience.

Transgender Representation in English Literature

Although not directly transgender, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* destabilizes gender roles through Viola's disguise as Cesario. Viola remarks: "*Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness / Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.*" (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II.ii). The play demonstrates how identity, attraction, and gender are socially performed rather than biologically fixed. Shakespeare's work anticipates later explorations of gender performance that resonate with transgender studies.

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is often cited as one of the first modernist explorations of gender fluidity. After Orlando's transformation, Woolf writes: "*Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been.*" (Woolf 1928, p. 138). This statement dismantles essentialist views of gender, suggesting that identity transcends physical embodiment. The novel offers a fluid understanding of selfhood, resonating with contemporary transgender theory. Jeffrey Eugenides' Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex* narrates the journey of Cal, an intersex person who transitions into a male identity. Cal reflects: "*I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, then again, as a teenage boy.*" (Eugenides 2002, p. 3). This dual birth metaphor captures the complexity of intersex and transgender experience. By blending family history with individual struggle, *Middlesex* places transgender narratives at the center of cultural and generational dialogues in English literature.

Comparative Perspective

Indian literature has historically intertwined transgender identity with myth, spirituality, and community. As anthropologist Serena Nanda observes, "*Hijras occupy a unique space that is both marginalized and yet culturally acknowledged within*

³ was a French writer and feminist, a member of the intellectual fellowship of philosopher-writers who have

given a literary transcription to the themes of existentialism.

Indian society,” highlighting how figures like [4]. *Shikhandi from the Mahabharata* and *Anjum* from contemporary narratives embody a gender identity deeply embedded in religious and social traditions. Shikhandi’s story, for instance, reflects the spiritual and mythological sanctioning of gender variance, where transformation is connected to divine will and cosmic balance. Anjum’s experiences similarly reveal the complex social recognition and marginalization faced by *hijras*, showing how community and cultural context shape transgender identity in India.

In contrast, English literature often frames transgender identity as an individual challenge to rigid social norms and an existential exploration of selfhood. Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* famously asserts, “Gender is a fluid, performative act rather than a fixed biological fact,” as the protagonist transitions from male to female across centuries, embodying a personal journey of gender self-discovery beyond societal constraints. Similarly, Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* explores the genetic and psychological complexity of gender variance, depicting Cal’s navigation of identity as an intensely personal and solitary experience, emphasizing individuality over community. Together, these works reveal that transgender narratives are both culturally specific and universally human. They show how gender variance transcends boundaries of geography and tradition, linking myth and spirituality with modern existential quests. As scholar Susan Stryker points out, “Transgender experience challenges us to rethink the nature of identity itself,” reminding us that while the cultural expressions of transgender lives differ, the fundamental questions about selfhood and belonging resonate across time and place.

CONCLUSION

The representation of transgender identity in Indian and English literature underscores the resilience of marginalized voices and the power of literature to challenge binaries. From [5]. Shikhandi’s epic presence to Anjum’s contemporary struggles, from Orlando’s gender metamorphosis to Cal’s intersex journey, these works demonstrate that gender is not fixed but fluid, dynamic, and central to human existence. By destabilizing societal norms, they not only broaden the scope of literary discourse but also reaffirm the dignity of transgender lives in cultural imagination. However, legal reforms alone are insufficient unless accompanied by deeper social acceptance, access to education, healthcare, and

meaningful employment opportunities. True inclusivity requires dismantling stereotypes, acknowledging transgender identities beyond tokenism, and integrating their voices in decision-making processes. The transgender experience in India, when seen through the lens of Indian Writing in English, becomes both a narrative of pain and of resilience. Indian English writers have increasingly given voice to those who were once silenced, placing transgender lives at the centre of stories that interrogate society’s moral, cultural, and political frameworks. The Indian context, with its ancient recognition of the *Hijra* community in mythology and ritual, stands in stark contrast to the neglect and exclusion they have faced in modern times.

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⁴ Shikhandi is a pivotal transgender character in the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, born a female to King Drupada of Panchala but later transformed into a man through a sex exchange with a Yaksha.

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