



## LITERARY ACTIVISM: A TOOL TO EXPLORE BODILY NORMS IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

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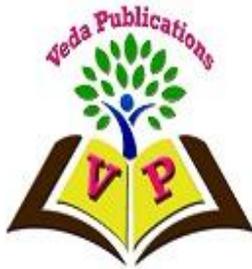
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### ABSTRACT



Literary activism basically combines political, social and cultural ideas with moral beliefs and present it in the form of writing. The writer here plays the role of the activist who voices his/ her opinion to endorse equality and social justice. A major issue dealt by literary writers at present is the issues faced by the Trans genders or the 'third gender'. 'The famous social activist and writer Arundhati Roy has portrayed the problems of trans genders in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, especially the prominent issue of how society looks at the body of such people. The human body now becomes a part of society and culture. The characteristic features for the acceptance of a human body in specific society are regulated and controlled in the interests of the population. Rather than being something personal, the body is now becoming more and more socially constructed. This paper attempts to examine how the Trans gender character named Aftab is alienated in society as he fails to follow the norms of body constructed by the society around.

**Keywords:** *Body, Society, Equality, Activism.*



## INTRODUCTION

The society around us constitutes of traditions and customs, a variety of cultures and a mixture of communities. To retain social order, the human beings should remain united. However the society creates borders among the people themselves based on factors like caste, religion language, gender etc. Among the many marginalized groups, the 'transgender community' or the 'third gender' is left forgotten and wiped off completely from the existing social order. The position of these people is always a topic of conflict as they don't adhere to the societal norms and conditions. The role of biological sex at the time of birth and accepted behavioral pattern based on the specific gender is one major factor that determines the position of a human being in the accepted social framework. However the inconsistency in terms of performance of these individuals in relation to their biological gender and gender expressions make them alienated from the society. Hence they are always degenerated throughout their lives. They are abandoned and remain invisible in society as they fail to fall under the accepted social structure which creates grave wounds, especially in terms of their identity.

The transgender group is always in an urge to assert their identity and be accepted in society. A binary reading of gender is still persisting in society yet in the past decades the issues of this marginalized group has gained great attention. The lives of the transgender have always been a topic of discussion in the present literary works, seminars, films and symposiums. The literary works have become a core area to express about the controversial concept of transgender issues. Many literary writes have explored the estrangement and emotional issues faced by transgender like Maya Sharma, Lakshmi, Devdutt Pattanaik etc. Their literary works created space to discuss and examine how this marginalized group becomes a prey of discrimination, denunciation and mistreatment in the eyes of society. A prominent literary writer and social activist who portrayed the issue of the third gender is Arundhati Roy. Her recent novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* presents in a unique manner the atrocities faced by a transgender from the 'Hijra' community in the eyes of society. Roy being a social

activist has always used her canvas of literary writings to advocate the rights of the downtrodden and marginalized. Literature for her is a medium to express her views on the present society and the prominent issues persisting around. The writer thus takes up the most discussed topic- the life of a transgender and actively propagates for the rights for this third gender in society. The main aim of this paper is to examine in detail how Roy uses literary activism to explore how the body of a transgender becomes the pivotal factor for marginalization and how body becomes a social construct by exploring the character of Aftab, a transgender in the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Literary works have the power to touch the heart and minds of people and influence them to bring out a change. It is the element of creative innovation in literary writings that attracts the attention of the readers. Every literary work is a reflection of social, cultural and political conditions that occurs around us. Roy has used her novel to portray a prominent issue in the life of a transgender- the concept of body.

The physical features and lifestyle of a transgender is always under great controversy, especially in relation to the gender norms in society as it breaks the boundaries of conventional gender traditions. The first and foremost discrimination of transgender occurs in terms of body and physical features. Body becomes an important component in human life because it is the source for satisfying our needs, like the need to eat, drink, sleep etc. Our bodies share a major portion in the formation of specific identities.

Thus the human body now becomes a part of society and culture. The characteristic features for the acceptance of a human body in specific society are regulated and controlled in the interests of the population. Rather than being something personal, the body is now becoming more and more socially constructed.

## DISCUSSION

Roy has framed the character of Aftabas part of a society that believes that the first and foremost evidence of human existence is the presence of a proper human body. The ideas of Roy in relation to body as a social construct can be



examined in the views of the famous sociologist Chris Shilling. The famous sociologist Chris Shilling in his work *Changing Bodies* published in 2008, states that the experiences of the body are “Layered, complex and at different levels with respect to human subjective experiences, interaction, cultural processes, society and history” (Shilling 21). Body is not merely a skeleton wrapped with muscle but also an object full of meanings. He further states that the body is also a part of society. According to him, body as an objective entity can never be separated from its subjective properties. A person does not merely occupy a static body but becomes a part of a process of being. In this process of being, society plays a very important role. When we gaze at the bodies of others, we interpret their characters and features based on the visible physical evidences

The identity of Aftab as a third gender is concealed right from his birth by his own mother owing to the fear of the society. The main reason behind this is his physical body. The existence of an incomplete girl –part underneath his boy parts triggers fear in the mind of his mother who hides it from her own husband. His mother experiences trauma after observing his body as she clearly knows that every single thing (living or non-living) has a gender in Urdu, the only language she knew. However in the case of her baby it is a dilemma as there is no other word to express the gender of her baby other than ‘Hijra’. For a moment the mother faces a kind of aversion to the incomplete baby in her hands. Thus Aftab gets the name of a hijra right from his birth owing to his body. The following words are indicative of how his mother analyses the position of her baby within the norms of society:

Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Every thing except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him-Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar. (Roy, 8)

Roy severely criticizes through her words how bodily norms constructed by the society creates rift in the life of an infant. The physical indifference of Aftab even restricted the motherly love as his mother, Jahanara Begum prays to god to teach her how to love a baby who will never be accepted in society. She always tried to keep Aftab close to her and

prayed for the girl part to heal. The boundaries of society aware to his mother restricted the childhood of Aftab from school and all other pleasures of life owing to his physical incompleteness in the eyes of society. Even the voice of Aftab became a source of indifference in society. He had a sweet, true singing voice of a girl. Initially the people appreciated him for his voice but later other children in his music class started teasing and snickering him for his voice. ‘He’s a She. He’s not a He or a She. She-He, He-She.’ (Roy, 12).

The parents of Aftab took him to a doctor, a sexologist to determine his sex. According to the doctor, he was not a Hijra yet for practical purpose can be called one. On the other hand, he was instilled with both male and female characteristic features. The doctor called Aftab a ‘Hermaphrodite’ and suggested that the female parts be removed surgically. On the other hand, it was also made clear that even though his male parts were dominant, he might always have female tendencies throughout his life. His parents tried to forcefully implant boy tendencies by dressing him up in male clothes and telling him the stories of warriors and heroes. All these instances from the novel are indicative of how Aftab’s family is scared of the societal norms that will alienate him owing to the incompleteness in his body.

After joining the Hijra community, Aftab decided to undergo a surgery to transform his body to that of a woman. His mind and soul was that of a woman and wanted his body also to abide by the rules of society set for a perfect lady. He underwent corrective surgeries, had breast implants, took pills to reduce facial hair growth and had hormone treatment. Even after undergoing all these corrections and painful treatments, Aftab was never able to become Anjum in the eyes of the society. The physical appearance still proved incorrect in the eyes of society. His body never adjusted with his mind as both were contradictory.

## CONCLUSION

What is crucial is that constructions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are intimately connected to the power relations that permeate the social and cultural world. We all live in a set of patterned and structured relations of unequal status and power. The body, as



presented in the novel is not merely a physical fact for the individuals but a component which is constantly examined and accepted in society. The writer thus effectively uses literary activism to endorse equality and social justice in terms of body for the character Aftab in the novel, which symbolizes the plight of the transgender community in general.

#### REFERENCES

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jini Varghese is currently pursuing her Ph.d from Bharatiyar University, Coimbatore for the past four years. Her research work is based on an exploration of the elements of social activism in the literary works of Arundhati Roy. The research gives special emphasis on a comparative study between the elements of social activism in Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* and *The Bible*. Her areas of expertise includes literary studies related to Eco-criticism, Post-colonial studies and Feminist literature. She has also authored literary articles and presented papers in many seminars and symposiums.

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