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Reviewing The Marginalization And Representation Of The Third Gender In India: A Postcolonial Study

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Abstract
The third gender is a social group that has coexisted alongside men and women throughout history. In India too, the third gender constitutes an important part of the country/s population, comprising almost seven lakh people today. Although there is no standard definition of third gender in India, roughly it can be said that people who do not conform to the biological and psychological norms that define men and women are third genders. Nevertheless, their existence has always been denied by the mainstream society. Even though the rights of the third gender were accepted by the Indian Supreme Court in 2014, nothing has been done at the ground level. Therefore, they have always been subjected to marginalisation, discrimination, and other forms of socio-political injustice. Nevertheless, attempts to safeguard their self-identity and existence have been made in India through literary devices like classics, epics, novels, and autobiographies. This article investigates the postcolonial challenges and crises faced by the third gender in India, analyzing the intersection of colonial history, cultural displacement, legal battles, and literary representation. The research findings revealed that the commonly occurring themes in these pieces of literature are the loss of social identity, ostracization, negligence, and denial of many socio-political rights have perennially shrouded the lives of third genders in India.

Keywords: *Transgender, third gender, eunuchs, gender representation, queer literature, Indian literature.*

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The socio-cultural landscape of India is deeply entrenched in historical and colonial legacies that continue to influence gender identities. Among the most marginalized and stigmatized communities is the third gender, often referred to as hijras, kinnars, or aravanis. This article investigates the postcolonial challenges and crises faced by the third gender in India, analyzing the intersection of colonial history, cultural displacement, legal battles, and literary representation. Through a postcolonial lens, this work critiques the persistent marginalization of the third gender and explores the emerging discourses that strive to redefine their identity and agency. The third gender must be understood as the societal category comprising people whose biological orientations make them neither identifiable as men nor as women. Identification of a sliver of the population as the third gender is a major component of gender ideology that challenges the binary gender system where men and women exist. The third gender has existed in every culture, class, and community since ancient times. Nevertheless, the identity of the third gender became prominent in modern times when the need for recognition of their rights started gaining attention. In India, there are approximately seven lakh people who belong to third gender. However, there is no formal and standardised definition of the third gender. Instead, the Indians whose biological orientation refrains from categorising them as males or females are referred to as 'Hijras'. However, the term 'Hijra' is used as an umbrella term in India to refer to communities that have been part of Indian society for centuries like Kinnar, Eunuch, Kothis, Aravani, Jogappa, Shiv-Shakthi, and so on. Since the notions of sex and gender deeply influence Indian society, Indians belonging to the third gender were subjected to discrimination, injustice and social ostracization for years. They were subjected to verbal, physical and sexual abuse, social victimization, false cases of arrest and criminalization and several other forms of mistreatment. Thus, the lack of recognition of the gender status of the third genders as per the notions of the traditional society has been the major factor that kept them out of the mainstream society and denied their basic civil rights.

In April 2014, the Supreme Court of India recognized the third gender as a legal identity in the landmark *NALSA v. Union of India* case. This decision marked a significant step towards institutional recognition and aimed to secure rights to education, employment, and healthcare ("National Legal Services Authority"). Yet, legal recognition alone has not dismantled the deeply ingrained prejudices that the community continues to face. Despite constitutional guarantees, the third gender struggles with socio-economic exclusion, lack of access to education, healthcare, and public services, and widespread discrimination. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, has been criticized for being paternalistic and failing to incorporate community voices. For example, the Act requires a certificate of identity from a district magistrate, making self-

identification cumbersome and intrusive (The Transgender Persons Act). Furthermore, the third gender faces violence, both within families and in public spaces. They are often subjected to harassment, sexual violence, and police brutality. Employment opportunities are limited, forcing many into sex work or begging for survival (Stryker 104). Another layer of challenge is the lack of awareness and sensitization among the general population, law enforcement, healthcare providers, and employers. Although government and NGO initiatives attempt to promote inclusivity, implementation remains inconsistent. Gender sensitization programs are often minimal or symbolic, lacking the structural change necessary to shift societal attitudes. Some of the recently published works on the topics of gender binaries, problems like discrimination and exploitation of the third gender are *Friends Under the Summer Sun*, written by Ashutosh Pathak, *Guthli Has Wings* written by Kanak Shashi and *We Are Not the Others: Reflections of a Transgender Artivist*, written by transgender writer and activist Kalki Subramaniam.

Before the advent of colonial rule, the third gender held a unique socio-religious position in Indian society. Ancient texts like the *Kama Sutra*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* include references to non-binary and gender-diverse individuals. Hijras were often associated with divine powers and were invited to bless weddings and childbirth ceremonies. Their existence was acknowledged, if not entirely integrated, within the broader fabric of Indian society. However, the British colonial regime imposed a rigid, binary understanding of gender that delegitimized and criminalized non-normative identities. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 labeled hijras as a "criminal tribe," institutionalizing their stigmatization (Reddy 25). This colonial legacy disrupted indigenous conceptions of gender fluidity and forced a westernized moral and legal framework upon Indian society. The third gender has played a prominent role in literature for a long time. One of the earliest and most widely read Indian epics, the *Ramayana* is a famous Indian classic where the presence of transsexualism is prominent. Even though India has always maintained stigmatized perspective about the third gender, this Indian epic presents several incidents to promote the concept of gender. On reading Ramayana, it can be found that when Rama was going to 14 years of exile in the forest, he told his subjects to get back to work and not to wait for him. However, the transgenders waited for him all through this long span because his advice was meant for 'men and women' only. This depiction of the third gender in Ramayana indicates their unequal social status in society with respect to men and women. Moreover, the focused instruction of Lord Rama to 'men and women' only also signifies that Indian society has never recognized the existence of the third gender as humans.

Mahabharata, another Indian epic, also contains references to the third gender. Shakhandi is one such character who was born as Amba in her previous birth and gets birth as a third gender in the present birth to take revenge. Shikhandi is depicted as an individual with powerful and chivalrious nature by virtue of which she defeats the chivalrous Bhishma. It can be understood from here that through this depiction of Shikhandi, Mahabharata intended to put males, females and the third gender in the same social position. Again, the temporary transformation of many male characters into third genders can also be found in Mahabharata. For instance, Arjuna changes into the eunuch dance trainer *Bruhannala*, Krishna into Mohini, a female form of Vishnu and Chitrangda as the princess with manly attributes in this epic. These can be interpreted as attempts to bridge the gap that exists between the mainstream society and the community of the third genders which subjugates them to mistreatment, social ostracization and socio-political discrimination.

The depiction of the character of Ila in *Shrimad Bhagavad-Gita* reflects the crisis of the third gender in Indian society. In *Shrimad Bhagavad-Gita*, it is seen that Ila has been presented as the daughter of Vivasvata Manu and Shraddha who wanted to have a son. Their prayers to have a son was granted by God who changed Ila to Sudyumma. However, the curse of Shiva and Parvati forced Sudyumma to change his gender from male to female and become Ila every month. Moreover, Ila forgets about her identity and gender role in each of her altering transformations. Hence, in one such transformation as a woman, Ila marries Budha. Thus, the depiction of Ila in this Indian classic can be interpreted as the saga of identity crisis, lack of social recognition and stigmatized approach towards the third genders who do not conform to the criteria that define them as males or females. In some Indian scriptures, Budha, the husband of Ila is a transgender. From this, it can be further stated that the marriage of Ila with Budha is an instance of same sex marriage which challenges the stigmatized conventional societal views on the legal standing of homosexuality and same sex marriage.

Postcolonial theory offers critical tools to examine how colonial ideologies continue to affect gender identities in contemporary India. Thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon have explored the complexities of identity, marginalization, and the subaltern. Spivak's concept of the subaltern is particularly useful in understanding the third gender's erasure from dominant narratives (Spivak 271). The third gender, as subaltern subjects, often cannot "speak" within the hegemonic structures that silence or distort their voices. Their stories are either appropriated or ignored in mainstream discourse, which reproduces colonial hierarchies. Bhabha's notions of hybridity and mimicry are also pertinent, as the third gender navigates between traditional roles and modern identities, often mimicking heteronormative behaviours to gain social acceptance (Bhabha 122). Fanon's ideas about the internalization of inferiority and the

psychological trauma of colonialism can also be applied to the third gender experience. Constant exposure to societal rejection fosters a sense of alienation that impacts mental health and self-worth (Fanon 82). This postcolonial psychoanalysis helps in understanding the emotional and psychological crisis faced by the third gender community in postcolonial India.

Literature plays a critical role in either reinforcing or challenging social norms. Indian English literature has started to engage with transgender narratives, although representation remains limited. Works such as Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* portray hijra characters with depth and dignity. Roy's protagonist Anjum embodies the pain, resilience, and complexity of third gender existence in a fragmented society (Roy 15). Another significant work is *A Life in Trans Activism* by A. Revathi, a trans woman and activist. This autobiographical account offers an insider's perspective, challenging stereotypes and foregrounding the lived experiences of the third gender. Revathi's narrative disrupts the victim-saviour binary by emphasizing agency and resistance (Revathi 45). Theatre and cinema also contribute to the discourse. Films like *Tamanna* (1997), *Daayraa* (1996), and *Super Deluxe* (2019) attempt to explore transgender identities with varying degrees of success and sensitivity. While some productions rely on sensationalism, others provide nuanced depictions that question societal norms and celebrate gender diversity (Narrain 135). Contemporary poetry and digital storytelling have also become avenues for the third gender to express themselves. Social media platforms allow queer poets and writers to bypass traditional publishing gatekeepers and reach wider audiences. This literary activism blends personal experience with political critique, expanding the archive of third gender narratives.

A Life in Trans Activism is a contemporary narrative by Revathi Murali which depicts the personal life accounts of this transgender activist. This story shows how a woman trapped in the body of a man is equally tormented when she is taken in by the transgender community. The climax in the narrative is that the woman finds mental peace and discovers her self-identity when she changes her sex to unshackle the woman trapped in a man's body. This novel by Revathi can be interpreted as a narrative that solely focuses on the third gender and highlights the issue of the challenged self identity of the third gender in a society with a conventional outlook. This novel depicts the life experiences of the protagonist as she endeavours to find a job, how she gets a job in an NGO that helps transgender people and how she gets promoted from office assistant to director of her organization. The most noteworthy thing here is that Revathi narrates that she is ultimately absorbed in an organization that is run by transgenders and works for transgenders. So, this entire experience can also be understood as the voice of the entire clan of third genders whose voices are silenced by the mainstream society and their social, political and economic rights are taken away unscrupulously. The existentialist crisis of the third gender in India has been highlighted in many Indian narratives. These crises include a lack of social acceptance, a stigmatized approach, discrimination, abuse and sexual harassment.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, a contemporary novel by Arundhati Roy, also highlights the crises faced by third genders in the Indian society**.** This novel presents the character of Anjum, who is a transgender woman who tries to earn a decent livelihood in Delhi and ends up working as a sex worker. The precariousness of third genders and ambiguity resulting from existence in the middle of culture that does not recognize them is depicted in this novel. Thus, analysis of this journey of Anjum from her home to Delhi and the turns each stage of her life takes exposes various sorts of crises like social stigmatization, ostracization, identity crisis, discrimination, mental, verbal and physical abuse and denial of basic fundamental rights like the right to live and right to work that the third genders face in Indian society.

Me Hijra: Me Lakshmi is also a significant contribution to this field. This is an autobiography written by a transgender activist, classical dancer and motivational speaker through which the writer has narrated her own life experiences. Through this autobiography, Lakshmi has narrated her journey from a girl child born in a middle class household in India to a woman. The autobiography presents the crisis that Lakshmi faced for being born as a trans gender in an orthodox Brahmin family and how she had to fight tremendous odds to earn social recognition and dignity. Several types of crises like sexual oppression, humiliation, disintegration from society, stigmatization, lack of education and loss of identity that characterise the life of an average transgender in Indian society forms the central theme of this autobiography. Laxmi's narrative positions the hijra identity as indigenous to South Asian culture, contrasting it with Western binary understandings of gender. In one poignant moment, she states, "We are neither man nor woman; we are both. We are the Ardhanareshwar—the half-man, half-woman deity" (Tripathi 58). By invoking Ardhanareshwar, a composite androgynous form of Shiva and Parvati, Laxmi ties her identity to Hindu cosmology. This is not merely a religious metaphor but a decolonial act—an assertion that hijra existence is sacred, legitimate, and indigenous. Laxmi openly discusses her experiences in sex work not as a source of shame, but as a means of survival and empowerment. She writes, "When society gives you no job, no respect, no right to live with dignity—what do you do? You make your own way" (Tripathi 121).

The experience of the third gender cannot be understood in isolation from other social categories like caste, class, and religion. Intersectionality reveals how multiple forms of oppression intersect to intensify

marginalization. A Dalit hijra, for instance, may face caste-based discrimination in addition to gender-based violence, leading to compounded vulnerability (Reddy 143). Feminist and queer movements in India have been criticized for their upper-caste, urban-centric biases. The third gender often remains on the periphery of these movements, which fail to address their specific concerns. This exclusion points to the need for more inclusive and intersectional activism that recognizes and values diverse experiences. Religious identities further complicate the social positioning of third gender individuals. In Hindu traditions, hijras are associated with divine power, while in conservative Islamic communities, they may face religious ostracization. The multiplicity of experiences shaped by faith highlights the inadequacy of monolithic frameworks in analyzing third gender realities (Stryker 77).

Despite the challenges, the third gender community in India continues to assert its rights and dignity. Grassroots organizations like the Humsafar Trust, Naz Foundation, and Sahodari Foundation provide support, advocacy, and empowerment. These organizations create spaces for dialogue, education, and health services, and work to change societal attitudes (Narrain 128). Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for visibility and activism. Third gender individuals use digital platforms to share their stories, challenge stereotypes, and build solidarity. These online spaces offer a counter-narrative to mainstream representations and provide a sense of community. Public events such as pride parades, film festivals, and academic conferences have begun to include third gender voices, enabling them to challenge dominant narratives. Collaborative projects with artists, writers, and activists further amplify their visibility and foster creative resistance. Educational initiatives are another form of resistance. Increasingly, transgender rights and gender diversity are being introduced in university curricula and public discourse. This educational engagement helps demystify gender variance and promotes long-term attitudinal change (Stryker 164).

The third gender exists parallel to the males and females in every society and the Indian society is also not an exception. Ethically, people belonging to different genders as humans too and should not be counted as queer beings. Nonetheless, this sliver of the population is often denied the basic rights and dignity as of the males and females. Even though the Supreme Court recognized the third gender in 2014, nothing concrete has been done practically for its proper implementation. However, as the crisis transgenders is a pain point of the Indian society for ages, the depiction of this issue faced by the third genders is found in many contemporary literary works as well as classics of India. Hence, this study was undertaken to compare different literary sources of India to understand what and how these sources have represented the challenges and responses of the third gender in India. The selected readings that formed the core of this study are Indian classics like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and *Shrimad Bhagavad-Gita* on one hand and contemporary pieces of literature like *A Life in Trans Activism*, *Me Hijra: Me Lakshmi***,** and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. While analysing and comparing the traditional pieces of literature with the contemporary pieces, the first observation that was arrived at is that the central theme is to bridge the gap between the social status enjoyed by males and females with that of the third gender. Second is that each of the pieces of literature has brought the agony of third genders living in mainstream society through a protagonist. However, while traditional characters like Ila, Mohini and Shikhandi challenge the typical roles assigned to trans genders as sex workers by presenting them as wives and chivalrous warriors, contemporary literature clearly talked about the social, political and economic crises faced by the transgenders. These contemporary narratives also show how society forces them to work as sex workers and sex solicitors and how the third gender has to fight with the oddest of adversities in their homes and professional worlds to maintain their dignity as human beings who deserve similar respect and social recognition as the males and females.

The crisis of the third gender in India is rooted in colonial legacies, cultural erasure, and systemic discrimination. A postcolonial analysis reveals how power, identity, and resistance are entangled in complex ways. Legal recognition, though essential, is insufficient without societal transformation. Literature, activism, and policy must work together to dismantle oppressive structures and affirm the dignity and rights of the third gender. To move towards genuine inclusivity, it is crucial to amplify marginalized voices, challenge normative frameworks, and embrace gender diversity as integral to the nation's cultural fabric. The journey is long, but the growing visibility and resilience of the third gender community offer hope for a more just and equitable society. More inclusive representation in mainstream media, intersectional policy-making, and transformative education are essential to ensure that the third gender is not merely recognized but empowered. As India continues to grapple with its colonial past and modern aspirations, reimagining gender beyond binaries is not just a social necessity but a moral imperative.

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