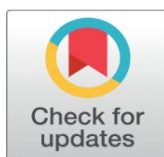
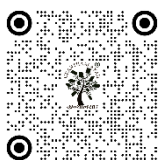


PERFORMING THE SELF: TRANSGENDER AESTHETICS IN VISUAL CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE IN THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies that transgender identity is actively constructed through performance, specifically, through aesthetics, visual culture and practices as shown in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Moving beyond traditional frameworks, it demonstrates that gender is performed, represented and challenged within complex socio-cultural contexts. Arundhati Roy uses the character Aftab/Anjum to illustrate how transgender people challenge dominant ideas of gender, identity and belonging, making space for authentic self-expression. By applying theories of performativity and visual representation, this study shows how clothing, gestures, spatial occupation, and community rituals act as visible markers of transgender identity in the Hjira community. The analysis explains how these representations reflect tensions between lived transgender experience and larger institutional discourses, including religion and science, that attempt to define or constrain gender variance. This highlights the persistent gap between social institutions and actual lives.

The paper is organised in three parts: first, it analyses Roy's storytelling and how the novel uses visual and performative elements to construct transgender identity. Second, it investigates religious interpretations of gender nonconformity. Third, it assesses evolving language around transgender identity in scientific and cultural contexts. The central claim is that Roy's novel shows transgender identity not as fixed but as something enacted, restoring visibility, agency and alternative belonging in a frequently exclusionary society.

Keywords: Transgender Aesthetics, Visual and Show Culture, Gender Performance, Queer Representation, Intersex Individuals, Hijras, Literature, Science, Religion

1. INTRODUCTION

Transgender refers to people whose gender identity or expression is different from their assigned sex at birth. Some seek gender reassignment or medical treatment, while others do not. The term 'trans' is used interchangeably. Studies show more people now identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. Many still struggle with their assigned gender and do not explore their identities. Transgender people are an underserved, vulnerable population (Beemyn, 2010; Rankin, 2003). They face higher risks of homelessness, unemployment, assault, mental illness, and sexually transmitted

infections due to marginalisation (Conron, 2012, & Mass.gov, 2011). Society is not prepared to support these communities. As a result, they are vulnerable to harassment and discrimination. Few organisations offer strong support, making it harder to combat prejudice and hostility. This study looks at how transgender people, as a minority in a gender-normative society, see their own life achievements.

Literature, science, and religion are the main ways a community asserts identity and validates existence. These are the icons of modern civilisation to which individuals place their faith. People analyse religious teachings and connect them to scientific and medical contexts. Literature empowers marginalised individuals in society. It lets people explore facts of life and helps the world understand these challenges scientifically. The general public accepts literature if it links to science. Still, misconceptions persist because people seek confirmation in religious texts.

2. LITERATURE AND REALITY

“Do you know the reason why God created Hijras? One afternoon, she inquired of Afthab while perusing a dog-eared 1967 copy of *Vogue*, captivated by the blonde women with exposed legs. “No, why?” It constituted an experiment. He resolved to construct a living entity devoid of the capacity for enjoyment. Consequently, he compelled us...Who is content here? Nimmo remarked that it is all just a front. What causes their discontent? Inflation, school enrolment, domestic violence, infidelity, riots, and conflicts are external problems. These issues eventually stabilise. But for us, rising prices, school admissions, abusive spouses, and unfaithful partners live within us. The turmoil and conflict are inside us. The Indo-Pak conflict lives in us. It will never stabilise. It is not possible. Aftab fervently wished to refute her, to assert that she was utterly mistaken, since he was content, more so than he had ever been. He exemplified the Nimmo Gorakhpuri fallacy, did he not? However, he remained silent, as doing so would necessitate disclosing his status as not being ‘normal’, a revelation he was not yet ready to make”. (The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, 23)

Afthab, the main character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, is a fervent Hijra living on society's margins. Anjum, born male, was named Aftab as a child. Young Aftab enjoyed singing but stopped after being mocked for a feminine voice. After gender reassignment, Aftab meets a Hijra who leads him to the Khwabgah. He visits often and soon feels at home there. The novel shows a transgender person able to live in a shelter and quietly exist within social rules.

Transgender people have faced persecution for decades. They are denied opportunities and pushed out of mainstream society. Many are called “tainted.” They face intolerance and adversity but do not give in to pity. Instead, they build reputations and show tenacity in many areas. The story of Daya Gayathri, a woman in a male body, shows these challenges. Born to Anadu and Alfonse in Angamali, Daya looked and acted like a girl, but was misunderstood. She was assaulted from a young age. At school, bullying forced her to leave. Yet she stayed strong. Later, she attended Maharajas College, where she discovered her true self and gender. She worked in Ernakulam. Her parents eventually accepted her. Now, she is self-aware, and her name is Daya Gayathri.

JamJamsheer, born in Calicut in 1995, later became known as actress Anjali Ameer in Kerala. He lost his mother as a baby. By seven, he felt different. After the Malayalam film *Chandpott*, people called him by the movie's name to tease him. He befriended girls and took dance classes. Later, she moved to Bangalore, underwent sex reassignment, and became a woman. Gendered self-fashioning has many challenges, including institutional experiences. For example, a recent incident in an NHS hospital showed how a transgender patient's strong reaction to being misgendered exposed the fragile side of gender performance. Misrecognition disrupts the performed self and reveals tension between identity and social acceptance. Sara Ahmed's idea of “affect” helps explain how feelings like shame, anger, and alienation shape reactions to invalidation.

The hospital is also a place of surveillance and control, as Michel Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum faces similar tensions. She uses performance to gain visibility and agency in marginalised spaces. This shows that transgender aesthetics are not just about appearances. They are part of the daily struggles for recognition, in which the self is enacted, challenged, and changed within systems of power and emotion.

A recent incident in Kochi shows the risks faced by transgender individuals in public spaces. In early 2025, two men who were lorry drivers violently assaulted a transgender woman near a metro station at night. Police say the men hit her arms and legs with an iron rod before fleeing. The Kerala Police later caught the suspects and charged them under relevant laws.

People believe the attack was driven by bias and social hostility toward transgender identities. Such violence is common against gender minorities in India. Transgender people, especially those in informal or night jobs, remain at

risk in public areas. This case shows how affective responses like disgust and intolerance, explained by Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural politics of Emotion* (2004), are expressed through violence meant to discipline and marginalise non-normative identities.

Kochi is often called cosmopolitan, but it can become a contested space. Here, transgender bodies are hyper-visible and vulnerable. This event mirrors situations in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, where people with marginalised identities struggle in unsafe social and spatial settings. The attack in Kochi is not just an isolated crime. It signals deeper social and cultural problems in India regarding gender nonconformity and public life.

The stories live on. They do very well in school, but they struggle to maintain their family life. They are unable to perform the role of genuine parents. Scientific evidence suggests that selecting SRS is a viable option, enabling individuals to fully actualise their perceived gender identity. Nonetheless, it is limited and cannot provide a sustainable solution. They must follow a strict and conscientious regimen for the duration of their lives.

3. RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSGENDER MATTERS

Gudiya once sought to express that Hijras occupy a distinctive status of respect and veneration in Hindu myths. She narrated to Kulsoom Bi the tale of Lord Ram, his wife Sita, and his younger brother Laxman, who were exiled from their kingdom for 14 years. Those who revered their sovereign accompanied him, vowing to follow him wherever he travelled. Upon reaching the outskirts of Ayodhya, where the forest began, Ram instructed his troops, saying, "I urge all of you, including men and women, to return home and await my return. The soldiers and women, powerless to oppose their sovereign, returned home. Only the Hijras awaited him attentively at the forest's periphery for the full fourteen years, as he had failed to acknowledge them. Are we consequently remembered as the neglected individuals? Usthad Kulsoom Bi said." (Roy 53)

Religious discussions around transgender identities show a complicated relationship between religious authority, cultural norms, and changing moral views, often swinging between acceptance and rejection. In Hindu traditions, gender is often viewed not as a rigid binary, but as a fluid and symbolic construct, as illustrated by mythological narratives such as the tale of Shikhandi in the Mahabharata and the androgynous representation of Ardhanarishvara, which integrates masculine and feminine principles within a singular divine entity. These depictions indicate that "the Hindu mythological imagination has long welcomed gender ambiguity and transformation" (Vanita and Kidwai 102), thereby providing a cultural-religious framework that validates non-binary individuals. This mobility is also seen in the historic acknowledgment of hijras, who fulfil a ritualistic function in South Asian communities, but contemporary societal attitudes frequently deviate from these inclusive norms.

Christian theology exhibits a range of views, from rigid adherence to a binary account of creation to more inclusive, justice-focused interpretations. Conventional readings of Genesis (1:27) "male and female he created them" have frequently been employed to contest the validity of transsexual identities. But progressive theologians question this kind of literalism by putting the Christian values of compassion and equality at the center of their work. The Pauline statement in Galatians (3:28), which says, "there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus," has been construed as a challenge to go beyond socially imposed distinctions, such as those based on gender. In this setting, queer theology arises as a pivotal intervention that reclaims religious space for oppressed identities, positing that "the gospel's radical inclusivity demands the affirmation of all embodied experiences" (Stryker 54).

The political affairs of belief contrast with the politics concerning transgender issues, especially regarding Islamic concepts. The Quran and Hadith, the two primary books of Islam, forbid sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), as it is deemed the first measure in addressing the ailment as recognised in modern culture. Since its beginning, Islam has consistently championed the marginalised and downtrodden, fighting transphobia, misogyny and xenophobia rather than siding with the oppressor. Sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) continues to be a critical concern for Muslim transgender individuals.

Islam examines issues related to transgender individuals with considerable scrutiny. Islamic texts and discussions disclose five occurrences of gender ambiguity. Hijras are individuals assigned male at birth who are socialised as boys and subsequently embrace a feminine identity in adulthood. They wear feminine clothing, lengthen their hair, use cosmetics and embellish themselves with jewellery. They want to enhance their importance by mimicking the feminine voice. They are considered a third gender (neither male nor female) inside their societies (O'Brien, 2008; Nanda, 1999).

Islamic literature and Fatwas provide a clear understanding of the religious perspective on this topic. Within their different patriarchal cultures and communities, each of the individuals and groups that have been listed above has been forced to face a difficult existence. There was a tendency among traditional Muslim scholars and jurists to overlook them because the subject matter was rarely discussed and was less explicit than in the periods we live in now. From their point of view, these populations display a degree of biological ambiguity. Scholars emphasised the importance of clearly and concisely explaining their ambiguous character in accordance with Islamic criteria.

Throughout the history of Islamic civilisation, several obstacles have arisen due to a lack of awareness and scarcity of these issues. The ambiguous stance that Islam takes on issues of this nature led to the ridicule of a great number of people. It was not religion in and of itself that was the source of the problem; rather, it was the misreading of the Islamic perspective on reality. However, the Muslim scholars paid no attention to the instructional sessions that were held for the general public.

According to Dr Mirjalali, an Iranian surgeon who specialises in sex-change surgery, transgender people experience a deficiency of awareness both within their familial circles and in broader society. This contributes to an increase in the number of surgical procedures, which in turn increases the total amount of psychological strain. In Islamic nations and other locations that are characterised by civilising and theological patriarchy, transgender Muslims are continually confronted with problems and hazards. The vast majority of these concerns stem from societal factors and misunderstandings about Sharia and government laws.

There are four fundamental principles that Islam adheres to. The Quran, Hadees, Ijmau and Qiyas are all examples of this. The Quran is the word of God, while the Hadith consists of the words of the Prophet Muhammad. "Ijma" is the word for the agreement that a group of academics and researchers come to when they work together to come to a single opinion on a certain topic. Finally, the word "Qiyas" means comparing modern problems to similar ones that have happened in Islamic history. This is done so that religious leaders can give a fatwa about the problem at hand. The people who are trying to help transgender people are actually making things worse.

Certain major counties permit minors to participate in SRS without their parents' explicit permission. Families who seek treatment from a physician or psychiatrist are frequently dismissed and seen to be uneducated and eccentric. The concept of psychotherapy is seen as a sort of transphobia. During the course of sex education, children are either coerced or encouraged to undergo sex reassignment surgery, which ultimately results in a dependency on medicine that lasts a lifetime. According to the findings of a study conducted on surgery reassignment and its following effects, the suicide risk is more than twenty times greater ten to fifteen years after the operation.

That of similar peers, movements and activism directed towards LGBTQI+ individuals work in a manner that prevents any study that is in opposition to their goal, while allowing studies that are in support of their activism to be conducted. While community leaders document the names of persons who oppose the activity and consider them pragmatic, they work across social and educational institutions to effectively communicate with one another.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of enquiries within society concerning the position that Islam takes on transgender matters. In the first place, religion in and of itself cannot facilitate access unless it is mandatory. It investigates the complexities and conducts an in-depth analysis of the problem at the grassroots level, where academics collaborate to develop solutions for situations like these.

This concerns Sayyid Abd Allah, a young man who enrolled at Al-Azhar Medical Institution in Egypt in the early 1980s. While attending school there, he began to confront the issue of gender indistinctness. He consulted a psychotherapist and revealed the extent of his depression to the doctor. He identified the problem as psychological hermaphroditism (al-khunuthaalnafsiya). The psychologist utilised many techniques to restore his masculine sexual identity; nonetheless, he finally failed and discontinued the therapeutic procedure. The psychotherapist anticipated and confirmed that Sex Reassignment Surgery is the resolution for Sayyid. He contacted a surgeon, who subsequently sent him to another psychologist, who reviewed and determined that Sayyid's situation was concerning, recommending SRS as the prescribed therapy. He adopted the persona of Sally and survived in Egypt.

A multitude of consultations and allegations emerged on a similar affair. A multitude of physicians endorsed the operation; however, several contested it as a surgical alternative. On May 14, 1988, the Doctors' Syndicate dispatched a letter to the Mufti of the Republic, Sayyid Tantawi, requesting a fatwa about the matter. He stated that if the physician testifies and determines that SRS is the exclusive remedy, then it may be considered as a therapeutic option. This fatwa

was implemented as state legislation, subject to the criteria and endorsements of esteemed medical practitioners about the same issues.

The debate continues whether a person who receives surgical modification of their sexual organ fundamentally changes their identity as a man or woman, implying that their essential identity stays intact. If it transpires between the spouses, their marriage and life shall stay unaltered in accordance with religious law. In circumstances when the fundamental nature of man and woman undergoes modification, they are perceived in their modified essence. (Sharvani 1-137) (Bajoori 1-69). Clarity is essential, irrespective of whether the alteration relates to the substance or only the appearance.

The issue of Mukhannas (transgender persons) is addressed by Prophet Muhammad (s), who conveyed that Almighty God has condemned the Mukhannas society. The question asks whether God creates a category and then later feels bad about it. Doesn't that mean there is a contradiction? Imam Nawawi posits the existence of two categories of mukhannas. The original group consists of the people who are there now. They are not trying to act like the other gender. They are not to blame, and it is not a crime, so don't blame them. The second type looks for people of the opposite sex, which is against the faith and leads to the people involved being kicked out and condemned. These are fundamental principles articulated by Islam.

Buddhist philosophy provides a unique viewpoint by undermining the concept of a fixed identity through the principle of anatta (non-self). From this perspective, gender is perceived as a contextual and transient construct rather than an intrinsic characteristic of the self. Consequently, Buddhist philosophy might be interpreted as indirectly endorsing gender variety, as it opposes adherence to rigid classifications. While some monastic orders have historically enforced gender-based restrictions, the overarching philosophical framework underscores the importance of detachment from corporeal identification, positing that "identity, including gender, is ultimately illusory and subject to change" (Gross 213). This ontological adaptability offers a possible foundation for validating transsexual experiences within a Buddhist ethical framework.

Sikhism, founded on Guru Nanak's teachings of equality, strengthens the idea of human equality by not making any distinctions based on caste, gender, or social class. The Guru Granth Sahib does not directly mention transgender identities, but its main idea that the soul goes beyond physical form could be seen as a support for gender diversity. Sikh philosophy asserts that the divine light exists uniformly within all beings, hence contesting any manifestation of discrimination. In many religious traditions, there is a gap between what people believe and what they conduct in real life. This gap often leads to transgender people being pushed to the edges of modern society.

These theological viewpoints illustrate that, although numerous traditions have historically offered insights into and even validation of gender variation; their modern interpretations are frequently influenced by socio-political circumstances that perpetuate normative frameworks. Susan Stryker concisely asserts, "transgender phenomena are not new; what is new is the language and visibility through which they are understood" (Stryker 1). So, a critical look at religious texts and practices shows not only where exclusion comes from, but also how to make them more inclusive and humane.

4. THE VOICE OF SCIENCE

Medical science supports transgender people and Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS), but some people are against it. Transgender individuals frequently experience pain, sadness, hardship, dissatisfaction and despair in their daily lives. They want to find other places to live that are nice and safe. Modern research now calls this condition Gender Dysphoria. Someone feels stuck in a body that doesn't match who they are, which causes a conflict between their mind and body and makes them want to be free and whole again.

Gender dysphoria is not regarded as an uncommon condition; it is widespread and enduring globally. It combines the ideas of gender and dysphoria. Gender as a condition of existence. People often use the words "male" and "female" to discuss cultural and societal differences rather than biological differences. Dysphoria is a mental illness that makes you feel very unhappy or dissatisfied with your life. It comes from a Greek phrase that means "hard to bear." Harry Benjamin, a trailblazer in the examination of gender dysphoria, asserts that sex pertains to external appearance, whereas gender pertains to internal identity. The conflict between these two aspects is evident in gender dysphoria, exemplified by the universal gender symbol, which includes both a male arm and a female arm, representing the concept of a third gender or third arm. Sadly, the theme of captivity runs through their whole lives.

Transgender persons suffer gender dysphoria, a deep-seated sensation marked by a dissonance between their physical body and mental identity, distinct from the normative experience of others. It is completely separate. The world has advanced to the clinical subject. The study was performed in the area. Neuroimaging studies of people classified by gender as male, female, or transgender. Functional MRIs demonstrate that brain stimulation activates specific regions, each associated with different activities, shown by varying degrees of light. The brain of a transgender person perceives external stimuli in a notably different way. Individuals with gender dysphoria may have unique brain configurations, a phenomenon that is still being explored.

The intervention entails gender modification as a method of evading this confinement. Addressing the mind and striving to harmonise the cognitive functions of persons with differing abilities resembles the endeavour of synchronising the mind with the body; it is often regarded as a failure. Society utilises coercion, incentives and treatment, eventually leading to heightened distress and, tragically, suicides. Gender Dysphoria treatment seeks to synchronise the physical body with the mental identity via a gender reassignment procedure that culminates in surgical intervention. It helps liberate them from captivity and enables them to comprehend the essence of desire. It is a complex ablative and reconstructive surgery. Following the acquisition of the desired aesthetic, functional and sensory organs. This is a nearly complete representation of what God has granted to others. The objective and significance are in the alteration of physical control, especially with the male genitalia and reproductive organs, during the course of hormone replacement treatment. It rehabilitates and fully emancipates them, bestowing the independence they want. It represents the shift from distress to joy.

5. CONCLUSION

The Indian states prioritise the same community by providing financial aid. The Kerala Government offers financial aid of roughly 3.5 lakh for transgender males and 2.5 lakh for transgender women for surgical interventions, in addition to a monthly stipend of three thousand. It attracts a significant number of transgender persons to Kerala. Social media awareness initiatives efficiently aid individuals, facilitating their active participation in society. The concept of marginalised persons has undergone substantial evolution, placing them at the centre of societal discourse.

Despite the community being addressed in religious texts, the adherents remained unaware of the relevant concerns and participated in immoral actions against this group. The religious scholars instigated discussions within the community, offering guidance and assistance. This constitutes a substantial shift, and the population will not deride them. They may opt to understand and follow the religious principles and laws if they like. However, no religion will stop them from doing what they want and living their lives.

Transgender individuals must confront various challenges, and community leaders and influential figures should advocate for constructive dialogues and initiatives that permeate society, fostering an atmosphere devoid of prejudice and intolerance. The backing of literature is essential for the success of transgender individuals. It creates a path no one else has taken, leading them to success while others must take longer paths to reach their goals. They need to develop a systematic plan to address their problems and take on the task of teaching the public and the world, so their voices will be heard, and they may feel they belong and have control over their lives.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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