
**IDENTITY FLUX: A CRITICAL STUDY OF REPRESENTATION OF A
TRANSGENDER CHARACTER ANITA NAIR'S NOVEL CUT LIKE WOUND (2016)**

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Abstract: Literature can be looked upon as a strong tool of reflecting the society. Novel is the language of the society today where voices can be made heard. Not necessarily, these voices and the theories underneath those voices may go hand in hand and that can be a topic of critical discussion. The selected novel is the first in the sequel of two. Fifteen novels old Anita Nair entered the field of detective novel with the publication of Cut Like Wound in 2012. She introduced the character of Inspector Gowda into this novel. Though the novel received mixed responses for its narrative techniques it has been well acclaimed for the characters. The present paper comments critically on the representation of the central criminal character of Chikka alias Manisha. She is a transgender character who suffers gender dysphoria and out of her frustration ends up being a serial killer. The present paper tries to argue how such representations, at subtle level, add to already prejudiced approach towards transgender community. The study also boasts to bring into notice the misconceptions that underlie the projection of the Transgender characters in the novel.

Key Words: Murder Mystery, Gender diversity, LGBTQ, Gender Transgender, sex, sexual orientation, gender dysphoria

Introduction:

“Self-definition and self-determination are about the many varied decisions that we make to compose and journey toward ourselves... It’s OK if your personal definition is in a constant state of flux as you navigate the world.”

- Janet Mock

It seems like the world is moving towards gender diversity and later may lead to gender neutrality. But this hope is not without misconceptions and hurdles. There is a long battle waiting against gender nonconformity and homophobia. In such situation it becomes truly essential to defend every little right stand and oppose every little wrong projection. Let

it be that of a character in a novel. *Cut Like Wound* is a detective novel set in Bangalore, Nair's hometown. Inspector Gowda's unflinching eye for the crime and criminal, which had become idle with the indifferent police system, is ignited by a series of mysterious murders happening in the dark and remote alleys of Bangalore. Gowda along with Sub Inspector Santosh starts investigating the case which reaches in the last 30 pages to the criminal who represents the identity flux. Written in the format of a police procedural *A Cut Like Wound* is a character driven narrative. The criminal is an Identity flux. Chikka, brother of the criminal corporator of Bangalore is actually a transgender and a cross dresser who at night turns into a prostitute called Bhuvanna. Chikka cum Bhuvana is an identity flux formed out of her sex, gender, sexual orientation, her past. Besides this murder mystery, the novel dismantles the political, social, cultural, sexual and personal landscape of Bangalore City. Very few reviews of this Murder mystery take into account the depiction of transgender community as the unkind criminals. According to India Today, "This is not just a story of another smart cop on the trail of another serial killer. It is more an exploration of the mind of a killer that tempts the reader to sympathise". The question is whether the novel succeeds doing that.

Anita Nair

Anita Nair is mostly labeled as a feminist writer who writes about women and their problems. She is sometimes called a regional novelist as she is among the few Indian English writers who brought the colours of South India especially Kerala into fiction. M. K. Naik while defining Nair's place in Indian English literature states, "Anita Nair's first novel, *The Better Man* (1999), is a welcome change from the hackneyed East-west encounter theme. It is perhaps, the only novel written by a woman which is not about an Indian woman; nor is it freely peppered with incest." (98) Her novels have been translated into around twenty five languages; both regional and international. She received Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 2012. She has also been honoured with Arch of Excellence Award by the All India Achievers' Conference, New Delhi for Literature and FLO FICCI Women Achievers Award in 2008 for Literature. *Mistress* was in the long list for the Orange prize for fiction for 2008 and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize in 2014. Nair is a versatile writer whose writing is preceded by a thorough research of the content and she experiments with the narrative structures. Despite this her writing has not been discussed from various perspectives. Nair has mostly been discussed from the perspective of feminist theories and only occasionally from other concerns like depiction of caste system, marriage

or human relationships. The following review of representative critical writings about Anita Nair will show the research gap.

The phenomenon of Transgender and Gender Dysphoria:

Before going to the concept of transgender it is essential to understand three basic terms: Sex, gender and sexual orientation. Sex is the identity of the child as a male or female according to the genital organs. Gender on the other hand is how an individual feels from within: like a male, female, both or none. It is a social identity. Third is sexual orientation. It is to whom an individual gets physically or sexually attracted to: towards a man, a woman, both or none. Transgender is an umbrella term used to include other related entities like: transsexual, transvestite, cross dresser etc. the webpage of American Psychiatric Association defines transgender as: “a person whose sex assigned at birth (i.e. the sex assigned by a physician at birth, usually based on external genitalia) does not match their gender identity (i.e., one’s psychological sense of their gender). It is only recently that transgender community has become vocal and started claiming their place in the society and fewer times getting that place.

All these concepts are still in the process of getting convincingly absolute definitions. Sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression etc are absolutely personal and individual phenomenon. There can be as many genders as many number of individuals still it is essential to accept some concepts and definitions as ground to explore the depiction of the aforementioned phenomena of the transgender characters in the novel. American Psychiatric Association defines transgender as, “a person whose sex assigned at birth (i.e. the sex assigned by a physician at birth, usually based on external genitalia) does not match their gender identity (i.e., one’s psychological sense of their gender). Due to this incongruity between their gender realization (or gender identity) and sex assigned to them at the time of birth, they may face mental distress which can turn into serious mental disorder. It has to be noted here that not all transgender face such problems. In Psychiatry it is called ‘gender dysphoria’.

American Psychiatric Association defines gender dysphoria in adolescents and adults as a marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and their assigned gender, lasting at least 6 months, as manifested by at least two of the following:

- A marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and primary and/or secondary sex characteristics (or in young adolescents, the anticipated secondary sex characteristics)
- A strong desire to be rid of one's primary and/or secondary sex characteristics because of a marked incongruence with one's experienced/expressed gender (or in young adolescents, a desire to prevent the development of the anticipated secondary sex characteristics)
- A strong desire for the primary and/or secondary sex characteristics of the other gender
- A strong desire to be of the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one's assigned gender)
- A strong desire to be treated as the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one's assigned gender)
- A strong conviction that one has the typical feelings and reactions of the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one's assigned gender)

With these symptoms of gender dysphoria and realization of the slipperiness of all phenomena such as sex, gender, gender identity, gender realization, gender expression, sexual orientation, femininity which precede its discussion, it will be an eye opening line of interpreting the depiction of the transgender characters in the present novel *A Cut Like Wound*.

Analysis:

The novel starts on Ramadan and covering the period of 38 days finishes on St. Mary's Day. A transgender psychopath is the central criminal figure in the novel. Even while choosing a pronoun to refer her, a question arises whether to choose one in align with her sex, gender identity or gender realization. So we will take her strong gender expression as a basis to call her she. Chikka, the younger brother of the corporator criminal who himself turns out at the end of the novel a transgender. Chikka does not look like the other goons that surround Corporate Ravikumar. He does not even like the gang of loud eunuchs at home. He approves only one of them, Akka, the senior Eunuch and the witness of Chikka's transformation into a beautiful prostitute named Bhuvana (and later Kakshi).

The present paper finds the depiction of the journey of nine year old cisgender Chikka into a eunach Chikka who transform into a psychopath and murderer Bhuvana. Chikka was

sexually abused by an elderly and rich neighbour called Ranganath and he starts getting sexually oriented towards Ranganath. By the time Chikka turns twelve, both become each others' partners in sexual pleasures. Later when they get exposed to Ravikumar these intercourses between Chikka and Ravikumar get stopped. But later with some happenings related to this past, Chikkas wishes of sexual satisfaction from men get triggered and he starts finding ways of getting this satisfaction. Here he is clearly facing the problem of gender dysphoria. He wants to look like a beautiful girl and attract men towards her. He turns into Bhuvana. He becomes a cross dresser. He appears in the form of Bhuvana on the night of Ramazan when the novel opens. When Liaquat, another male prostitute recognizes that she is not a real girl but a eunuch and teases her saying, "Nice earrings, but you know something, they don't suit you. You are not pretty enough... or woman enough to wear them" (Nair: 2012: 10). She loses her rage and kills him. Thus a series of similar murders starts.

During the day Chikka is the younger brother of Ravikumar and a dangerous goon(at least he pretends to be one). At night with the command of the goddess, which can be taken as an example of Freudian displacement, he turns into Bhuvana; a lustrous beautiful girl who wants to be sexually satisfied by male partners. But when her partners come to know that she is a male, the spell of her beauty is broken and disgust replaces the love and lust in their eyes. Bhuvana hates that disdain and kills them with manja thread creating a cut like wound on their throats.

The novel is a long search for this criminal whose identity is in flux. Who is to be blamed for all these crimes? Bhuvana or Chikka? Man or a woman? Even if we decide to punish Chikka alias Bhuvana for these crimes; is she not a product of the society? And has not the society failed to include her? All this creates a net of confusion and stresses the vagueness of labels of sex, gender and even orientation.

Conclusions:

Should we excuse Nair for her depiction of transgender characters as criminals? The answers can be varied reflecting our individual journeys to become gender neutral in our behaviour. The central murderer of the novel represents the gender minorities and shows how we have a long way to go to become gender neutral society. She is a psychopath and definitely suffering from gender dysphoria. The writer, at a subtle level, succeeds in making us sympathise towards Bhuvana.

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Weblink:

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