

**Demystifying the Image of Eunuchs: A Study of
Indrani Majumdar's "The Paradox of Vantage Point"**

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to demystify the image of 'Eunuchs' in our society where they always have been defined in a derogatory manner. The novel *The Paradox of Vantage Point* concerns the life of three friends-Anwasha, Vikram and a Eunuch Raghbir who later plays an imperative role in their lives. The titular "paradox" eventuates when Anwasha "has to, under unavoidable circumstances, share her room with a Eunuch" who later becomes her best friend. The Eunuch's character who was the "Knight in the shining armour" for Anwasha also becomes the object of mortification for her in public. The novel shows Anwasha's "vantage point" from where she commiserates with Raghbir on one hand but also feels hesitant when it comes to accepting him outside the walls of her house. The character of Raghbir in the novel basically deconstructs the crippled mindset that excludes eunuchs from the mainstream society, considering them as despicable creatures. The paper also deals with the idea of how a Eunuch, even if liberates himself from the societal boundaries, educates

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himself and even manages to live a “cultured” life different from his community still struggles to attain the desired respect in society. It basically shows the constant intimidation of society towards a Eunuch who, leaving all his anticipatory roles, tries to fit in the “civilized” life.

Keywords: Exclusion, Gender Identity, Eunuchs, Indian Society, Discrimination

Introduction

“Eunuch” according to the definition means an "individual in which reproductive organs of both sexes are present". And in India, we commonly address them as "Hijras". Mahesh Dattani, the most celebrated playwright defines the term as “of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally means ‘neither male nor female’.” (Dattani, 10-11). Hijras as a community are hardly researched, abused, scorned and callously neglected groups in Indian Society. They live in ghettos, face discrimination and earn their livings by begging, dancing and whoring. They are often considered as objects of curiosity, ridicule exploitation and abuse and even a mistake of God. In India, they are the stigmatised, socially marginalised and economically impoverished people.

Many writers in the country make strenuous efforts to deal with the issue but they somehow seem to commiserate with eunuchs and end up creating their work nothing but a piece of their own solicitude. Indian Writers like Kamala Das and Mahesh Dattani who attempt to deal with the eunuchs as “invisible minority” often portray them in their succumbed degraded positions. Kamala Das in her poem *Dance of the Eunuchs* observes their dance and portrays it as a reflection of their empty and melancholic life. The poem reflects the irony of eunuchs’ lives who are welcomed for marriage and child-birth like occasions but are themselves deprived of these two blessings. Mahesh Dattani who on the other hand tries

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to create a strong eunuch character in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* ends up creating a vulnerable victim object of the society. The Eunuch character Kamala in the play after breaking the manacles tied to her in forms of norms begins affair with the son of a minister, Subbu but soon her dauntless bravery smothers when Subbu's father gets to know about their affair and conspires to kill her.

Indrani Singh Majumdar, a budding writer unlike others envisages the bright possibilities of eunuch's community and shows the audacity to create her debut piece in a manner that even other prominent writers fail to contemplate. She begins her career with the novel *The Paradox of Vantage Point*, which explores the predicament of eunuchs and the heart-wrenching harassment that they face because of being different from the other two accepted gender divisions.

The novel begins with the protagonist Anwasha Nair, a writer in the novel who lives a secluded life in one Bhk apartment but soon one eunuch who lives opposite to her seems to be a threat to her seclusion when people of his community start to come over his apartment and make a loud noise by "speaking, Clapping and giggling", all the gestures that we usually expect from Eunuchs. But the beauty of the novel lies in its very depiction of the main eunuch character Raghubir Kishor who not being monstrous or evil (that we usually expect them to) creates a different picture of his identity. He doesn't dress up in a typical eunuch look, instead dresses himself as a normal human being particularly a male figure who "used to roam around in casual shirts and formal pants".

The most obvious expression that we have of a eunuch is a man wearing female attires and their gestures of clapping hands are the most expected expressions and their defining characteristics but the Eunuch character in this novel doesn't conform to the societal stereotypes instead described as a normal soul with strong personality. The source of his income is not begging or performing at ceremonies, but instead he works "as a typist

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(stenographer) in the courtroom". Even though he leads a life of a normal human being working from nine to five in the office, he always has been a stone in the eyes of the society because of his identity as a "Eunuch".

The character of Raghubir in the novel is the most courageous and self-determined who didn't even hesitate to run away from his native place. He managed to escape from his own father who wanted to hand him over to eunuch community because he was "the sole reason for his parents to hang their necks in shame". He was blinded even by his own parents who just wanted to get rid of him but Raghubir courageously pursued the path different from his eunuch world. After everything, he "never wanted to be the part of this world" instead wanted to make a new one where "self-reliance was more than anything else". He manages to educate himself and makes himself capable of playing every role in the society that a normal person can, still he has been deflated at every step of his life.

"Every morning when I see myself in the mirror, I never sense anything ABNORMAL in my traits. I breathe, eat, read, write, walk and sleep the same way you people do. I am also probably equivalent to you in terms of education" (Majumdar, *The Paradox of Vantage Point*, 16)

Even his education and employment had no meaning for people in his society but his sexual deformity was enough for them to tag him as a despicable object. He seems to be a threat to the so-called "reputation" of the civilized society that Anwesha explains while complaining about him to the secretary. She says

"Our Avani Complex is one of the posh areas and imagine what impressions you are projecting of our place with.....with.....with having a Eunuch as tenant...He may spoil the decorum of a civilized flat society in near future" (Ibid, 8)

Further, Irony occurs when Anwesha who wanted to get rid of the Eunuch Raghubir, ends up sharing her flat with him. She also gets dumbstruck when she gets to know that the

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person she had an aversion for, is indeed more an ideal person having a strong, proud and confident persona. He is portrayed as a strong figure who is not ashamed of being a Eunuch; He says "Yes I am a Eunuch. And not for a second, I am ashamed for it. It has been a greatest blessing because it has made me more open to face challenges with confidence" (Ibid, 16)

He even becomes the ideal character for Anwasha later, who often actuates her into writing whenever she finds herself suffering from writer's block. The character of eunuch Raghubir appears more strong to the readers when he proves to be a more loyal friend to Anwasha than her other 'male' friend Vikram Mandane who lives next to Anwasha's apartment. People of our society believe eunuch only a person who lacks full male/female sexual organs and even the quality of both of them but the character of Raghubir, I believe, has the vigour and strength of both the genders and that makes his persona even stronger. He was capable of safeguarding Anwasha(or any woman) that even the manhood or masculinity of Vikram hesitates to. It becomes clear when Anwasha hearkens to Vikram's self-absorbed comment on Raghubir's encounter with some 'rowdy guys' who 'were constantly trying to lay hands on a girl'. Raghubir saves the girl courageously delineating his staunchness and even blurts out his anger for the people who fail to respect women in society.

"Vikram I cannot stay quiet when I see anyone smudging equality. Women are not objects of lust that you enjoy and later throw in the dustbin." (Ibid, 64)

This incident, I believe itself elucidates society's fallacious notion regarding eunuchs that identifies them as fragile creatures. People these days fail to realize that a person's genital organ can't manifest the person's identity. A woman with feminine organ can also have masculine power that sometimes a man can lack. In the same way, it would be a mistake if we characterize someone based on his/her sexual organ.

Many contemporary socialists and theorists in the field of cultural studies investigate it and see sexuality only as a social construct. They believe that identity is never immanent in

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an object; it is constructed out of discourses. As a person's identity is the effect of the discourses of religion, race, class, gender, caste and sexuality. Judith Butler was one among those theorists who in her work *Gender Trouble* explains that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its result'. Identity and the 'subject' (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25), she suggests are performative constructs. One arrives at an identity, say male, through the performative act of behaving like a male. She proposes that Gender is not a fact or natural, but the effect of discourses that are controlled by power structures. It is

"a repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within the highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble*,33)

In the same way, the character of Raghubir cannot be categorized based on his genital deformity because his strong and distinctive personality can put anyone calling him "chakka" into shame. "chakka" basically is the word that we refer to a male person lacking masculine power. But In this novel, Raghubir's "performative" actions are manly that surely distinguish him from other members of his Eunuch community.

Further in the Novel, the reader finds the hypocrisy in the characters of "normal" human beings i.e Anwasha and Vikram. They both being friends of Raghubir feel ashamed when it comes to showing any kind of acquaintances with him in public, Raghubir on the other hand proves to be their best friend and supporting shoulder when it needs to be. The hypocrisy of both Anwasha and Vikram portrays the real Indian psyche that is dual and can't accept the socially ostracized class like Raghubir. It is reflected in Anwasha who believes that "All our lives we have been taught to raise our eyebrows to anything that doesn't conform to societal stereotypes. And this will not change for many more decades unless we bring the changes from the grass-root level"(Ibid, 38). Her hypocrisy is revealed when she

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once meets some publishers for her book that she has been writing by Raghubir's constant stimulation. She was reluctant in introducing Raghubir to them, feeling what image it will project of her if they get to know her acquaintance with a Eunuch. She "reduced a respectable person" who was her "best friend to a laundry man in a fraction of second". Anwsha who was a writer by profession

"wrote audacious, straight-forward articles about women empowerment, gender equality, peace and security, humanitarian actions, just now refused to acknowledge her eunuch friend and roommate in front of other 'normal' people. Someone who spoke at lengths criticizing people who treat eunuchs as a separate entity, just now lost the right to qualify as a human being. Someone who urged and inspired thousands of people through her writings to expunge the age-old dogma and routines, just now submissively embraced the world of normalcy in front of everyone".(Ibid, 89)

Ragubir who was a "Knight in the shining armour" for Anwsha is merely reduced to an object of mortification for her. Even her novelty fails to show the audacity to accept him as her own best friend and that elucidates the very idea of *The Paradox of Vantage Point* as the author explains it the point "when you are expected to take stands, you keep mum".

Conclusion

After examining the social milieu of a Eunuch's character in the novel I feel that this novel challenges the pre-conceived hierarchy of the two accepted genders which excludes those who do not conform to these two divisions. In a society where the gender roles of male and female are strictly specified, hijras as human beings find themselves trapped between these divisions. So, the research paper explores this execrable reality of our society that stigmatizes these sexual minorities from the mainstream society.

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The novel also forces the reader to contemplate over this significant issue that has not been taken into consideration since many decades. Even the homosexuals and women are not deprived of their rights in the present scenario but the eunuchs are still overlooked and are seen as loathsome objects perhaps because of their abominable practices of prostitution and begging. So the novel can also be seen as an attempt to show the necessity of facilitating the education, employment and all basic civil rights to Eunuchs that can elevate them to respectable positions.

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