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Changes in the representation of the third gender (hijra) in Indian culture based on selected texts. Between antiquity and modernity

doctoral thesis in the field of literary studies, written under the supervision of dr hab. Halina Marlewicz, prof. UJ

Summary

The leitmotif of the work are the ways of perceiving the third gender (tritiya prakriti), currently referred to as hijra, in Indian culture on the basis of selected texts. The study carried out belongs to the field of Indian philology, to the sphere of broadly understood humanities, because its literary character often draws on knowledge from other disciplines, such as cultural studies, sociology, psychology, history and others, what indicates their interdisciplinary character. Due to the extensiveness of the issue, as well as the literature on the subject, the work is based on selected texts of Indian literature, including theoretical studies in the field of social sciences related to the subject matter.

The study of such a complex and constantly changing phenomenon required the use of various spheres of science, and was connected with the need to use various research methods. Therefore, the work, with an introduction and conclusion, is basically divided into two parts. The first of them, covering the first two chapters, discusses Western and Indian theoretical approaches to issues directly related to the content of the work, such as issues of gender, gender categories, gender and queer identity and methodology, which - as it turns out - despite natural associations with subject matter of the work, cannot be applied to the Indian phenomenon.

The third chapter is a theoretical introduction to the study of the situation of the third gender documented in literary and cultural texts created in particular historical epochs. This chapter describes the cultural and social ways of shaping the image of the third gender and provides an explanation of terms used to describe its representatives. This group includes many identities encompassing all gender ambivalent people: intersexuals, transsexuals, homosexuals, transvestites, hermaphrodites, eunuchs, etc., in other words men who are not fully men, therefore it was necessary to create their

typology based on anthropological and ethnographic works by authors such as Serena Nanda, Gayatri Reddy and Vinay Lal. The analysis of these works made it possible to bring the third gender community closer as it appears today, but also to show why gender or queer methodology are not tools applicable in the study of Indian hijras. However, since the category of the third gender is always considered in relation to the other two gender categories, the analysis of its social perception is made on the basis of literary criticism related to the gender trend, in order to determine its attributes, especially in the context of understanding the idea of masculinity and femininity and negotiating the meanings of gender in Indian ancient and modern culture.

The second part of the work is dedicated to the research. It consists of four chapters in which texts are analyzed using philological methodology, which serves to explain the content of works in relation to the main subject of research, in their historical context. The works were not reconstructed, because they were not the subject of the research. The phenomenon of the third gender, characteristic of Indian culture, has been studied on the basis of selected texts from specific historical epochs and shown through the prism of Sanskrit texts, translations of historical sources and studies from the Muslim era, English-language sources, contemporary autobiographies of hijras and their literary representations in selected novels of Indian literature written in English. Throughout the work, primary and secondary sources in English, French, Italian, German and Spanish were used, quoted in original languages together with Polish translations for the convenience of the reader.

Due to the multiplicity of terms used over the epochs in relation to the third gender, the work attempts to clarify terminology and trace changes in nomenclature resulting from cultural conditions, as well as to reach the etymology of individual terms. These activities are related to the main goal of the work, which was to draw how was the third gender represented in Indian culture, from antiquity to modern times, i.e. over 3000 years.

The fourth chapter of the work is therefore devoted to the analysis of ancient texts written in Sanskrit. The phenomena of androgyny and hermaphroditism were explained first, followed by the biology of the third sex. In India, since the beginning of time, there are three broad gender categories based on nature (prakriti), which includes three types of personality: male (pums-prakriti), female (stri-prakriti) and the third nature (tṛitiya-prakriti), as already mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* (*ca* 1200-1000 BC). It is important to attribute the third gender to manifestations of nature, and not to distortions of nature (degenerations). The third gender is explained in many ways: first of all, divinity can take various forms in Hinduism, from masculine to feminine and neuter which contains both masculine and feminine elements, or is genderless as stated in the Vedic texts. Secondly the reasons for its physical manifestation are stated in the texts that are the basis of Ayurvedic medicine

such as *Charaka Samhita* or *Suśruta Samhita*, but also the legal treatise *Manusmriti,* in which elements of embryologyappear. According to these beliefs, the sex of a newborn depends on quantity and quality of semen ofboth male and female (in the case of their equality, twins of different genders or a hermaphrodite willborn).

Since the biological existence of the third gender is already explained, in further considerations on In the example of legal treatises (dharmashastras), the legal position of the third gender was shown, which although fully accepted, it did not have equal privileges of the first and second sexes. First she could not inherit everything, and her sexuality was considered "inferior" because not leading to procreation, and while not itself punishable, it could be a cause of loss caste for those who have fused with the napumsaka (non-man). third sexuality gender is the subject of the subchapter analyzing fragments of the *Kamasutra*.

The last part of the fourth chapter is devoted to literary images of the third gender taken from epics, Puranic literature and drama. These images are evidence of the complexity of the third nature, which can be intersex, asexual or transgender, among others. In one episode of the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna is transformed into a eunuch as a result of a curse cast upon him by the nymph Urvashi. This is an example of transsexualism combined with asexuality, considering the fact that a 100% male turns not into a woman, but into a sexless eunuch. This creation may evoke eunuch figures, which are indispensably associated with eunuchs at Muslim courts, although research shows that in ancient India, before the Muslim invasion, men were not subjected to castration, unless as a punishment for serious offenses.

Another example of transsexualism appears in the *Padma Purana* where Arjuna again changes sex, this time becoming a beautiful woman named Arjuni. This transformation is taking place by the Goddess and there is no punishment, but rather a reward for devotion to the god Krishna, thanks to which the hero can achieve union with god by picturing the ideal of bhakti (the greatest love for god).

Vararuchi in his play *Ubhajabhisarika* painted a portrait of the eunuch Sukumarika, who in his grace and beauty surpasses all women, even the most alluring ones, courtesans, however, he c,annot find true love. In the *Ramayana* is supposed to be, according to the hijras themselves, a plot in which King Rama, going into exile, says, "Men and women, return to your homes" and, having returned from a 14-year banishment, he sees a group of people waiting for him explaining that, being neither men nor women, they did not feel empowered by the order of the ruler to leave the place.

This one, along with passages from the *Bhagavad Gita*, emphasizing the necessity of acting in harmony with one's own nature (i.e. the third one), are examples of the hijras referring to

mythological and religious threads in order to legitimize their position in society, apparently, as later chapters show, degraded over time. Chosen examples range from the 11th century B.C.E. to approximately the 12th/13th century AD. taking into account difficulties in establishing dates in pre-Muslim India.

Chapter Five is dedicated to eunuchs in Muslim courts in northern India. The period of Muslim invasions of India began as early as the 8th century AD, but the earliest related text quoted in the work is an account by Marco Polo from the end of the thirteenth century, in which he describes e.g. the province of Bengal, famous for the "production" and trade of eunuchs, who could be slaves, or young boys sold by their parents for this purpose

Other accounts coming from different times and Indian provinces included the empire of the Great Mughals extend to the 19th century. Their descriptions show that eunuchs played a fundamental role in the Muslim environment. On the one hand, they were guards, spies, but also helpers and guardians of women, on the other hand, they were employed as confidants of rulers, servants and administrative officials. They were a kind of bridge between the world of women (zenana) and the world of men (mardana). Apart from that, they were irreplaceable informants, the most important source of knowledge about the harem for the external world and vice versa.

Although there is no any mention of voluntary becoming a eunuch, at the same time, it can be concluded from the analyzed sources that the eunuchs were slaves who could never decide about their own lives, their position was so strong and prestigious that often other courtiers envied them the trust and respect of rulers, as well as the financial status they obtained. Therefore, both in the Muslim period and after that, it is customary to speak of the splendor of eunuchs in the Mughal era, when both the splendor of the empire and the golden age of eunuchs reached their apogee. It's worth to be noted that in the times discussed in this chapter there is no mention of the third sex or of none of the Sanskrit identities mentioned in the quoted literature, but only about eunuchs who, by the way, By Muslims were considered to be men deprived of masculine organ, and not non-men.

The sixth chapter deals with the campaign that had to end with the complete pogrom of the hijras during the era of British colonialism. These times characterized by an attempt to eradicate the Indian tradition in favor of a new ("better") culture, new laws and a new Victorian morality are very well depicted I works by American researcher, Jessica Hinchy. Whereas some social groups did not feel the new governments as extremely harmful, others, such as the hijras, have been marked painfully. Reports of the first European visitors to India show that their contact with the hijra community evoked such feelings as fear, indignation, disgust or contempt. It was difficult for Westerners to understand the reason of acceptance and even respect for eunuchs at Muslim courts.

Repulsion and condemnation led to undisguised hatred expressed not only verbally in terms of the "vilest and most polluted beings" committing "abominable" practices,[1] but also by deeds like classifying hijras as a separate tribe, recognized as criminal, against whom, among other things, the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) was introduced.

A dozen years earlier, in the 1860 to the Indian Penal Code was added article 377 penalizing "acts against nature",[2] by which the British authorities delegitimized the identity of the hijras, accusing them of sodomy, perversion, and moral offense opening an era of persecution, physical violence and social marginalization. They were considered men, therefore they were forbidden to use any female expression with which hijras identified themselves. The aim of the new politics was to introduce the binary, normative gender division as the only admissible.

Under the new law, the hijras were deprived of the centuries-old social role of performers of rituals, thereby they were deprived of their livelihood. Colonial policy directed against them had to end up with their natural extermination. Loopholes in the law, extent area of the British empire and less scrupulousness in the enforcement of the law of some officials caused the British plan to fail. The hijras have learned to circumvent the law avoiding public gatherings and female expression in formal situations, moving around to provinces not covered by discriminatory legislation and allegedly conforming to normative masculinity, thanks to which they managed to stay alive and defend their identity, continuing to be present not only in India but also in neighboring countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The last, seventh chapter deals with the issue of the third gender in India based on its contemporary representations in belles-lettres and autobiographical literature, which allows the use of narratology as a research method. Since the concept of identity emerged only at the beginning of the 20th century in connection with the Freudian theory of psychosexual development, only at this point, the third gender which includes all the non-heteronormative gender manifestations in India, can be considered from the point of view of identity, and not only as the non-belonging to the other two genders or as a sexual orientation.

The evolution of the concept and perception of the third gender presented in the previous chapters can be translated into the current situation and the place of hijras in Indian society. Although India gained its independence over 70 years ago, remnants of British rule remain still present and

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[1] Hinchy 2014, p. 275.
[2] Article 377 does not explicitly contain the word "homosexuality", but it has been used to prosecute those engaging in homosexual practices.

therefore still unjustly discriminatory against hijras. This is evidenced by the cited autobiographies, in which, despite individual differences, many elements can be considered common to all of them. The most original voice is a collection of poetry, aphorisms and thoughts of the hijra activist Kalki Subramaniam, *We Are not The Others*, which is an attempt to deconstruct ideas about transgender people, on behalf of whom he "speaks because [they need to] be heard."[3] His followed by the voices of A Revathi and *The Truth About Me*, Living Smile Vidya and *I am Vidya*, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* and Manobi Bandyopadhyay with *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*. All the analyzed autobiographies, with the exception of the penultimate one, deal with the subject of rejection, not only social in the broader sense, but also within the family for which to have a male child, often long-awaited, who feels like born in the wrong body is bound with shame and disapproval. Another painful issue is the difficulty, and often impossibility, to create a sustainable, deep sentimental relationship. But the hardest part, however, is to find your own bodily dimension that does not correspond to the sense of your own identity.

Portraits of the hijras created by contemporary authors touch upon similar aspects, dominated by the motif of perceiving oneself as an uncomfortable, painful reflection in the mirror, which does not correspond to the awareness of oneself as a woman (trapped in a body that is not her own). Indian writers created iconic figures of hijras, whose noble heart and heroic humanity contrast with their physical features, so much disgusted in the previous era. Arundhati Roy in the *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* created Anjum, a literary version of Mona Ahmed, the famous Delhi' hijra who, in search of his own place in the often hostile world, was able to create a place where all the alienated and incompatible were welcome. Anosh Irani in *The Parcel* recreated the world of th Mumbai's red light district, Kamathipura with Madhu and others like her prostituted hijras, still capable of daydreaming and deep empathy. And finally Khushwant Singh with perhaps the most iconic figure of Bhagmati, hijra from birth, whose apparent ugliness combined with kindness, affection, devotion and unparalleled sexuality makes her the most refined mistress, surpassing all others.

The only anti-heroine is Bhuvana from Anita Nair's *A Cut Like Wound*, associated with the category of hijra, but not identifying herself with it. In fact, Bhuvana is a young man with disorders caused by the sexual abuse he suffered as a child at the hands of an elderly neighbor, which shaped his sexuality. Chikka transforms into Bhuvana when he hears the voice of the Goddess, he is very pleased with himself and at first glance men take him for a woman until they convince themselves that he is a man. Chikka/Bhuvana's reaction to rejection is a brutal murder. This example, untypical and unrelated to the phenomenon of Indian hijras, due to the elements of transvestism and non-binary

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[3] Subramaniam 2021, p. 7.

nature, is associated with it as one of the possible ways of depicting the third gender in contemporary Indian literature.

Studying the issue based on written sources, historical contexts, changing laws and social norms allowed to construct the image of the third gender in India with relative changes. In each of the epochs, hijras were treated differently than men and women, so over the millennia they had to create a separate space, their own world based on a specific hierarchy and rules that enabled them to live in accordance with their own identity,