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# Coming out of the Closet: A Study of Marginalization and Identity Formation of a Marginalized Sex in Anosh Irani's the Parcel

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**Abstract :** *This paper concerns how, from a dilemmatic character at the beginning of the novel to a fully developed character, Madhu in Anosh Irani's *The Parcel* becomes free by accepting herself as she is. *The Parcel* is a story about the protagonist, Madhu, who has spent most of her life as a transgender sex worker in the notorious red-light district of Bombay, Kamathipura. Madhu, throughout her life, can't understand her body and soul and chooses to remain in her mind's closet. As a boy in childhood, Madhu knew that his soul was fitted into the wrong body. So, she tried to fit into the hijra community for acceptance, but Madhu rejected the soul's desires. Since Madhu's childhood, Madhu had faced much ostracization from family, friends, and the whole society and chose to remain unhappy by accepting those condemnations. Accepting your own body and listening to your soul is more important for coming out of the closet to the queer community than the acceptance of a dominant patriarchal society. Madhu, in the beginning, refused to understand that. Later, she contented her position as a lover and a mother and accepted herself. In the process of showing the condition of prostitutes and transgender people in Bombay's Kamathipura, Anosh Irani shows the psychological development of Madhu.*

**Keywords:** *Closet, Gender, Heteronormative, Identity, LGBTQ, Patriarchy, Queer.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Coming Out of the Closet is a metaphoric term often used to describe LGBTQ people's self-acceptance of themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc. from the constricted closet of their mind. In a society where accepting sexual orientation or gender identity is not easy, where defying the spectrum, gender is thought to be a social construct. Society knows little about certain kinds of sexuality and considers them taboo. LGBTQ community fear and think that they will get punished by society for any digression from the pre-constructed heteronormativity. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault explains how disciplinary



institutions work by enforcing certain codes as “normal” and any deviation from that normal codes should be punished: “everything might serve to punish the slightest thing...What is specific to the disciplinary penalty is non-observance, that which does not measure up to the rule, that departs from it. The whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming is punishable...” (Foucault 178). Society works in the same way as a disciplinary institution by marginalising LGBTQ people as minorities to dominate their quest for queer identity.

The queer study is an extension of the feminist discourse. Queer study questions the hetero-patriarchy and the heteronormative world. The terms “queer” or “queerism” is hard to apprehend as a marker of trouble or subversion. The concept of queerness led to queer concepts, which advanced throughout the 1990s, largely in reaction to Foucault's ideas of a regime of strength. The regime describes the cellular strategies of energy, working beyond the narrow spheres of regulation to organise the means of bodily sensations. From the ancient era to the modern world, queerness in gender has always existed. People were aware of it as well as knew nothing about it. They felt it but never expressed it. It was so near and so far at the same time. So, it is important to know more about queer theory in a society where gender has actually limited.

### **Literature Review**

Anosh Irani's *The Parcel* is a story of an astonishing heart Madhu, who has spent most of her life as a transgender sex worker in the notorious red-light district of Bombay, Kamathipura. Madhu, born as a boy, has willingly castrated himself to identify himself as a “hijra”. Later in the novel, Madhu is assigned to take care of one of the parcels, named Kinjal, in Kamathipura. “Parcel” is the code for the young girls who have been trafficked for sex work, and Madhu has to prepare the parcel for her inevitable fate.

Through the novel *The Parcel* I want to discuss how the protagonist Madhu came out of the closet to accept herself. To show my research, I have divided my paper into three sections:

- I. In search of “thine own self”
- II. Ostracization of society: no way home
- III. Breaking the Closet

#### **I. In search of “thine own self”**

In the novel *The Parcel*, though Madhu was born as a boy, Madhu had a feminine soul. Like the protagonist of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Arjee, Madhu's mind was too caught in between the boys' and the girls' world but did not belong or was wanted in either. Society and even Madhu's own family, when he was a boy, forced him to be ashamed of his feminine soul that was trapped in a male body. Madhu's parents did not understand how to accept him as he was. From his childhood, he was a matter of laughter for his feminine traits. Society even has arraigned him for walking like a girl. This is because gender identity has been put into proper limits and those are the problematic aspects that are needed to observe. In the book *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett theorized how the omnipresence of patriarchal society specifies certain codes of conduct, gestures, and attitudes towards each sex. Those who do not behave in ways considered appropriate for their biological sex are punished by society by terming as “other”.



Madhu's feminine attributes were not in his control. According to Sigmund Freud, the "Id", the unconscious mind remains within every human being from their day of birth. The "Id" is a very important part of anyone's personality. The "Id" does whatever feels natural at the time, without focusing on the moral principle of other. His "Id" forced him to behave in certain ways that are different from those of his biological sex. He could not understand why his father wanted him to be a boy: "How could he fail at something he already was?" (Irani 56). He did not understand why Taher, his first crush, when was holding his hand, felt like forever to him. He did not understand why his family and society could not tolerate his inner space, which is natural, Madhu, like the rest of society, could not accept a different relationship between his inner and outer self. It can be understood more clearly by Judith Butler's notion of gender as drag. Drag "reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (Butler 175).

Gurumai called Madhu "Chickni". She referred to Madhu as female; Gurumai's churi in Madhu's hand helped him to identify his true self. According to Butler, "part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender" (Butler 137). Madhu rejected the phallic power that had been given to him biologically. Madhu knew that it was a path that would exile him from society, his parents and his community but Madhu joined the "hijra" community for acceptance. Madhu was ashamed to accept himself like that because Madhu knew that society would never accept his castrated identity, which challenges the social norms of gender and masculinity in particular. Madhu joined the Hijra community because of the love she received from Gurumai and Bulbul, the love she never got from his family. She came to know that she was different but could not accept what she had become.

## **II. Ostracization of society: no way home**

At the beginning of the novel, when Madhu was forty years old, she still felt that she had not found home and happiness: "I am indeed a migrant, a wanderer. For almost three decades, I have floated through the city's red-light district like a ghost" (2). Like the word 'hijra', which is said to have been derived from the Urdu phrase "hijrat karna" which means to migrate, Madhu became a migratory being in her own body and soul. Even when the parcel asked her who she was, Madhu wondered: "Who am I? What am I? Those were the questions Madhu had asked herself ever since she could think properly, and after all these years, she still became squidgy when she was confronted with them" (123). Gender identity is the personal conception of oneself as male or female or androgynous. It should be self-identified through inherent instincts and personal perceptions. According to Butler: "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (Butler 25). Gender identity is one of the most important elements in figuring out who you are. The basic state of queer studies is that sexuality is also an identity marker. One identifies their identity through performativity acts. Identifying gender is a particular type of process than being a fixed identity. Butler says about the performativity: "gender proves to be performance— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-



exist the deed” (Butler 25). This can be also understood by the famous quote of Simone de Beauvoir: “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir160). Madhu felt like a woman but neither could accept the woman nor the gender fluidity in her. Madhu remained homeless by not accepting the woman within her. Home is not a physical location, but rather the location of our hearts. “Hijra house” for her was like an asylum, not a home. The dominant society ostracized her existence in many ways. Madhu was doubly marginalized as a transgender and a prostitute. Even women, marginalized sex, have more power than transgender people because of having a certain gender identity. Transgender people often feel uncomfortable in their gender roles. There is gender dysphoria and diaspora in Madhu. Madhu, with her castrated identity, became, in Julia Kristeva’s term, which Kristeva has used in her book *Power and Horror*, “the abject” for society and even in her mind. According to Kristeva, “the abject” is like the ‘uncanny’; it might be part of you, but you still feel horror towards it. Her body had become a metaphor for “otherness,” threatening the heteronormative social order. Her past haunted every moment, even at the age of forty. She left home as a boy in search of freedom of the soul, but could not find peace and only realized freedom itself was an illusion. By suffering marginalization from her own family, society, and so-called friends, Madhu chose to remain in the darkness of the closet of the mind and also understood that there was no way home for her soul and mind.

### **III. Breaking the Closet**

When Madhu was assigned to take care of the small girl, Kinjal, she at first took it just as a duty. Kinjal was sold into prostitution by her aunt. Madhu was preparing her to enter into prostitution. Madhu worked hard to persuade the girl that no one in her family cares about her and that they will never accept her even if she leaves. Though Kinjal did not believe in her words at first but it was the truth. Madhu attempted to raise the flame of hope in the little girl, though Kinjal knew Madhu had no option apart from sending her into prostitution. Kinjal tried to run away from Kamathipura many times, but she failed. Unlike other caretaker eunuchs, Madhu never did hit a parcel like Kinjal. Madhu always tried to make her feel that she was safe near her and that Madhu could fight to protect her at any time and moment. She did not tell her name to Kinjal but only stories about how “hijras” are the protectors and have the power of blessing from the ancient period. She wanted Kinjal to love her and believe in her. She could relate to her own traumatized past in the conditions and loneliness of Kinjal. Madhu, too, was never a matter of concern for her family. She was metaphorically trapped, like the parcel in the cage of her mind. She never thought of adopting a child, but when she cared for Kinjal like a mother for the first time, she realized how she had harboured this hope to become a mother. Madhu started to believe: “...sometimes life gave you a lesser version of a dream, and it was up to you to take it” (188). Kinjal became a mirror for Madhu to identify the woman within her. This was also done by Gajju, the only man who loved Madhu unconditionally, identifying the woman within her. Kinjal and Gajju helped her to accept her feminine side, in the shape of a mother or a lover. At the end of the novel, she saved Kinjal from the gloom without thinking of its consequences. By saving Kinjal from her fate, she tried to rescue herself. She wanted to show the motherly nature in her to the helpless girl: “For the first time, Madhu allowed herself to hold a child – not as a parcel, but as a true child. Madhu embraced her with all the love she had failed to receive” (246). By taking care of the parcel, Madhu may also have fulfilled the



role assigned to the transgender community in Indian society. From the ancient period in Hindu mythology, eunuchs are considered the protectors of “harems”, and “rakhwalas” [custodians] of precious vaginas that meant the world to the men in power. So, perhaps Madhu also accepted her “hijra” identity by proving to Kinjal that she was her protector. Madhu broke the closet’s door and came out to prove: “To thine own self be true” (Ham.1.3.78-82). She knew its consequence was fatal, but it had become the only way of redemption for her feminine soul.

According to Butler: “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (Butler 136). The reason for Madhu’s unhappiness throughout the novel is her inability to accept her true self in her mind and soul. It is not logical to hope from the dominant cis-normative patriarchal perspective of the society to accept her queerness. In this Indian patriarchal society, what is important for acceptance is accepting her soul. In the process of showing the condition of prostitutes and transgender people in Bombay’s Kamathipura, Anosh Irani shows the psychological development of Madhu. From the very first chapter, the dilemma of whether or not to accept the woman within her is prevalent. At the end of the novel, she ultimately becomes a fully-fledged character who can think of herself as a mother, and a lover by accepting her fluidity. Bodily deformity matters less when the acceptance and the desire to embrace your own identity comes from the mind, or to quote Milton, “The mind is its own place and, in itself can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven” (Milton 254-255). Including the darkness of society and the Kamathipura, the horror of darkness was also within Madhu, which did not let her accept herself fully. Madhu couldn't do anything of her wish since childhood. In his book, *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes discusses the concepts of “artificial man” and “natural man”. “Artificial man” in body politics works as a metaphor for society: it is created by men. “Natural man” is the natural condition of a person. Hobbes describes the correlation between natural and artificial man. According to him, the “artificial man”, or the social body, dominates the natural or individual man, to maintain the social order. Madhu in the novel works as a natural man with her natural feminine attributes in a male body. Madhu’s father, in the Indian patriarchal society’s body politics, can be considered as one of the artificial men who try to dominate the natural tendencies of Madhu, and as a result, a schizophrenic condition and tumult work in Madhu. In Madhu’s mind, she also created both “natural” and “artificial man” and that “artificial man” could not let her happy with natural instincts. So, mental breakdown, sordidness, grief, and torment became her companion throughout her life. In the end, Madhu could discover and see the real reflection of herself as a woman. In *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai, the protagonist Arjie too at the beginning of the novel could not understand why his family was ashamed of his feminine qualities. Arjie, like teen Madhu, wondered how his father could turn him into a man by sending him to The Queen Victoria School. Arjie’s mother wanted to stop him from playing with girls by giving the reason, “Because the sky is so high and pigs can’t fly” (Selvadurai 19), which metaphorically means it is impossible to have feminine qualities in men. Ironically, The Queen Victoria Academy became the school where Arjie experienced his first sexual encounter with his lover, Sehan. At first, he felt ashamed of his choice because society and his family wanted him to. But later, by accepting himself, he proved that ‘Pigs can fly.’ Madhu had done the same thing by being a mother from her heart and letting the caged bird, the parcel, fly. The Parcels in Kamathipura





are always kept under the cage. The parcel, Kinjal, always tried to come out of the cage to fly high, forgetting that it is hard for a caged bird to fly freely. Madhu let the caged bird fly and also, in this process, resurrected her feminine soul.

## **2. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we can say that there is a need to understand the large queer theories and concepts that will help us to understand how cultural and political meanings of sexuality are socially structured. It is necessary to reverse the essentialist logic that prioritizes biological function. In that sense, we should ask how people use political meanings of sex and sexuality to learn and develop identity by understanding and accepting their bodies.

While researching Madhu's queer identity and psychological development, I discovered that there are many research articles in the novel about the marginalization of the trans protagonist, but there are still many unexplored parts of research on how transgender sex workers are doubly marginalized for their dual marginalized identity, which society has fated for them, and whether or not it is acceptable. Also, if these subaltern prostitutes speak up, will their voices be heard? or will they always be muffled as their existence ? needs to be explored further in the future.

In Anosh Irani's *The Parcel*, Madhu, throughout her life, can't understand her body, soul and mind. As a boy in childhood, Madhu knows that her soul was fitted into the wrong body and did not have the courage to accept the soul's desires. For Madhu, freedom and acceptance of the soul are more important than gender. She wants that from society. Madhu tries to fit herself into the right body by castration, to feel comfortable and accepted. For that reason, though he was warned by his father, he went to Gurumai to become a "hijra". Later, she realises "Neither man nor woman, she had found a place among beasts" (166). From the state of unhappiness at the beginning of the novel, at the end, Madhu accepts her queer identity by breaking the cupboard to become free which I have tried to prove in my paper. To become happy and free, the most important thing is to accept identity as it is. One can conclude with a quote from Ralph Ellison from his novel *Invisible Man*: "When I discover who am I, I'll be free" (Ellison). Madhu's redemption of her soul and her freedom at the end is only possible by discovering and accepting herself.

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