

# Macchindra More's *Janeman*: Narrating Verisimilitude of Transgenders' Suffering in India\*

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## Abstract

This paper takes Macchindra More's play *Janeman* as a touchstone to reveal the issues and sufferings faced by transgender people in India. It aims to revolve around the play written on the life of Indian transgender especially hijras, their life, struggles, identity crisis, battling hard with oneself every single day to battle with the world outside. The paper also targets to explore the contemporary relevance of such plays having cathartic effect on the audience and how far they succeed in purging the preoccupied nuances of people for good. Not only this but issue wise it tries to see which current policies aid or deter the ease of life for transgender e.g. rape culture, life of abuse, sexual assault, begging etc.

**Keywords:** Drama; Gender incongruence; *Hijra*; Transgender.

In the golden times of Elizabethan age, female characters were played by male characters and also most of the Shakespearean plays have cross-dressers in it, may it be Portia in disguise of a male lawyer or Rosalind disguising as Ganymede. Cross dressers were always sought for and welcomed but as far as they were men, since:

It was never illegal for women to perform on the stage in Shakespeare's era, but it was seen as an unthinkable moral breach akin to prostitution. The solution was to cast boys in the female roles. (Burge)

The effeminate men alike crossdressers still had possibilities of social inclusion till they explicitly chose to identify themselves as 'trans'. There was no mention of any concept of term like transgender in the Elizabethan age. In fact, the term for transcending beyond gender binary came as late as in 1910 used by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld calling them 'transvestite', then in 1949 the term 'trans-sexual' was coined followed by the term 'transgender' in 1971. Despite their preceding existence transgender were not acknowledged separately in a gender binary world.

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Not only in English drama but even Indian classical texts like Ramayana and Mahabharata have the mentions of transgender persons. Shikhandi is one such character who has been a subject of various plays. Transgender seems to be circumscribed in literature which prominently revolves around its gender binary construct of characters. Not only classical literature but modern and post-modern literature is restricted to this gender-binary congruent approach. Despite critical interventions in gender studies bringing out numerous gender variants like agender, gender neuter etc and even recognizing gender fluidity in humans. Sociological studies suggest that gender identity is a variable, it even can vary multiple times in a person's journey of life e.g. If a person identifies as a male today, one may not feel the same way in future and may identify oneself in any gender variant category later in life. The issue is complex and needs a sensitized understanding which can exhaust pages after pages to delve into, thus the paper restricts itself to the subject and treatment of transgender in the selected work of Macchindra More.

Transgenderism is still a taboo because of the social exclusion of this populace which dooms them to begging, prostitution etc. for their livelihood.

And as Aristotle rightly claims " Tragedy, however, is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear." The softer sensibilities of artisans have brought about exemplary scripts on the social stigma faced by transgenders in the mainstream society. Though transgender have been rarely scripted in a pivotal role in any genre but one such script, which takes the challenge to centre the play on the atrocities of lives of a transgender, is of the play written by Macchindra More titled *Janeman*. The play was originally written in a Mumbai vernacular Hindi (attempts to translate few dialogues have been made in the paper). It had been staged in almost all the states by now but the most renowned rendition is that of Waman Kendre's NSD production.

*Janeman* is a play which received a huge uproar primarily because of its subject Hijras. Hijras or eunuchs are the transgender who devote themselves to the ethnic job roles of seeking badhai etc at festivals and ceremonies. The locale of the play is of Mumbai slums where some more than ten hijras live together. They are one of the seven gharanas of Mumbai which is led by Najjo Nayak, and except her, the play has her chelas and her gurubai (sister guru) Panna who does not have any chela at the beginning of the play. Panna desperately wants to have a chela for it is said that if a hijra dies without having a chela one does not rest in peace.

Hijrahood has a culture of its own. Here, if one who wants to

join hijrahoodone needs to become a chela or disciple of a guru or Master and has to follow a custom of seeking a green saree from a guru to be a real hijra. Like in the play a twenty-two year old Mukesh, born as a male but who identifies being a woman, comes to Najjo asking for a saree so that he could be blessed as a hijra, but instead he is beaten badly for doing so because prudent Najjo knows that there are men who get distracted in their youth and confuse this distraction for a want of being a Transgender. Her experience has never seen any such person coming back after a good beating. But to Najjo's surprise he again dares to come the next day where Najjo accepts him for his real self's desire to become a hijra and makes her a chela of Panna, her first Chela and eventually the last too.

The actors of the play performed by Navrang, the theatre society of PGDAVcollege, have reported being mocked for their performances and before that. One of the actors reports:

Walking in the saris was quite difficult initially, we walked across the campus wearing them where people laughed at us, which is what we wanted to experience, we wanted to experience what hijras feel. (TOI)

They stated that for the research of the play they went to the places where transgenders used to live where they were scoffed off by them, few of them informed them that they can not speak till their Guru comes in, since a hijra guru is the master of the house. The chelas are not allowed to interact with the outer world without the permission of their Guru.

Transgender is an umbrella term used for transsexuals, eunuchs, hijras, Kotis, Aravanis, intersex etc. Since childhood one is taught the binaries of the gender as Male and Female, but transgender are people who identify with neither of them, they are the ones who psychologically could not identify with the gender they were anatomically assigned at the birth. The twin categories of gender fail to be apropos to what they are and feel inside out. What one inherits effortlessly since birth, the gender identity, they have to fight a long battle to get that. Indian Transgenders got the right of being the 'third' gender just recently in the year 2014 after the NALSA judgement. The prayer in the case was that "non-recognition of their gender identity violates Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution of India. Hijras/Eunuchs, who also fall in that group, claim legal status as a third gender with all legal and constitutional protection." (NALSA). And the legal status to the 'third kind' was given and Hon'ble Supreme Court directed the Government of India to add an additional column on all its official forms mentioning 'Others' in its gender category.

Indian Government is making policies and bringing out plans of reform and rehabilitation of this population which is said to be 4.9 lakhs of Indian population according to 2011 census. But still situations are terse, in one of my interviews one of the transgender activist Anindya Hajra when asked on how she sees future of Transgender in upcoming years post NALSA, she replied in one word 'bleak'.

Transgender people grapple with identity issues since birth. They are doomed to public gaze, abuse, mocking at the hands of society which makes them devoid of as basic rights of even playing outdoors with other children, they are restricted of this privilege as a measure to hide them from getting revealed and eventually bringing shame for the family. Because of this, most of the transgender children are either not even sent or are withdrawn from school at later stages, few of them voluntary escape the public institutions for these reasons of harassment. In the neighbourhood and family they face sexual abuse being vulnerable to such situations. The society shapes their future and it is because of this social exclusion that they choose to move to the ghettoed life of the hijra community. There, they feel at home with like-minded people in a less undesirable situation. These issues are far fathomable for the people who belong to either of the binaries of gender, thus they lack empathy. Since 2014 judgement the literary circles started getting spotted with the candid accounts of the hijra or transgender people and because of their narratives few of them started voicing out publicly, few such accounts were A. Revathy's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, Laxmi Narayan Tripathy's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya*, Manobi Bandhopadhyay's *The Gift of Goddess Laxmi*, Priya Babu's number of books and others.

Though these narratives introduced their readers to agonies of transgender person's lives, yet the need for the social inclusion of transgender is to sensitize common people, to break the myths which reduce them to traffickers or extorters further legitimising the social conditioning as a probable result of the 1871 Criminal tribes act, which declared transgender in the criminal tribe list during colonial rule. This play by More seems to touch on all these aspects together. It opens its audience to the mythological story of Aravan, Arjun's son in *Mahabharata*, who is going to be sacrificed for sake of social welfare, before dying he proposes a wish to get married to a woman, but no woman is ready to get married for one day and to be left as a widow forever. Thus, Lord Krishna takes a guise of a woman Mohini, gets married to him and consummates the marriage, the next day after the *bali* (the ceremonial sacrifice), she breaks her bangles and wails and mourn her husband's death and then again gets transformed to a Male body of Krishna. Then there is the mention of Bahuchara Mata, the

deity of hijras who is sought for, prayed and also, by some characters like Basanti is cursed for being responsible for making a man into a hijra.

At the very onset the play seems to project the common myth of abduction of children by transgender in order to make them hijras after emasculating them. There is an instance where Panna contemplates that she shall be doomed to hell because she doesn't even have one *chela*. Later, enraged after sometime she says that she will get hold of a good looking boy, capture him and castrate him to make him her *chela* where Nayak Najjo, the guru of the gharana scolds her for having these thoughts, she says:

“ Shut up you shameless! A person dies, he becomes air, ash, rest is all nonsense, but when a Hijra dies he becomes nothing. What ghost has casted a spell on your small mind that you talk of hell and doing such a sin. What is this life of Hijra? Tell me its meaning? Isn't it a hell? What hell do you talk about then? But yes! By stealing somebody's child and making one a hijra would surely get you hell. I have spent life in hijrahhood, in all my experience I have never heard if any community member have ever stolen a child to make him a hijra! A hijra has a heart of a woman Panni, we pine to give birth, to be a mother but what to do against the will of nature.” (More, 1/7)

The next myth, that Hijras forcibly make men into Hijras, is broken when Mukesh a young boy comes to become a hijra voluntarily, where he is scolded and sent off. However, the next day he returns and then is accepted because of his wilfulness to be a hijra and also that Najjo can see smile on Panna's face by making him her *chela*. The play presents the attitude of society for transgender that they are still considered as abductors or extorters. It is a common public notion that hijras steal away children and castrate them to make hijras which becomes one of the chief reasons of stigma faced by them. In an incident in the state of Rajasthan on August 31, 2019, angry mob attacked a transgender suspecting her to be a child-lifter. Basanti a transgender from Banswara had come for some work in Udaipur where she was badly beaten by crowd who took her for a member of child-lifting gang, she sustained injuries and was taken to the hospital by police. Incidents like this lets one postulate how Criminal Tribes Act 1871 might have shaped the mental conditioning of society.

As a matter of fact, not only the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 criminalized transgender as abductors and extorters but also the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill 2018 does, which was approved by the cabinet in Feb 2018, though could not be tabled in the budget session and lapsed. The draft of the bill approved by the Union Cabinet in its second point criminalises:

Aggravated forms of trafficking, which includes trafficking for the purpose of forced labour, begging, trafficking by administering chemical substance or hormones on a person [sic] for the purpose of early sexual maturity, trafficking of a woman or child for the purpose of marriage or under the pretext of marriage or after marriage etc. (Press Information Bureau)

This bill draft tends to 'inadvertently criminalize transgender people' by introducing a category of 'aggravated' forms of trafficking which includes trafficking for the purposes of: (i) forced labour, (ii) bearing children, (iii) inducing early sexual maturity by administering chemical substances or hormones, or (iv) begging. The punishment for aggravated trafficking is higher than for simple trafficking.' And since most of hijras survive on begging and prostitution they become vulnerable under this bill under the category of forced labour, they also fall into the third category where transgender are induced hormonal therapies in their transition. LGBTQ activist and scholar Vikramaditya Sahai proposes 'When a law prescribes life imprisonment for trafficking leading to AIDS or begging or injecting of hormones, it will ultimately lead to criminalisation of trans-identities' (The Hindu)

The daily routine of the hijra chores have been beautifully revealed in the More's play, how they live and what do they earn for living. They beg at the shops and streets, sing and dance and there are also some instances where there are incidental references of them being involved in prostitution. But they have no other way to do that because of the societal exclusion. When Bulbul, name given to Mukesh by Panna, asks Panna where her fellow hijras are going, she replies:

Now listen daughter, our community has three races, the temple ones, two the singing-dancing ones and three the ones who do bad business, now don't ask me what is this bad business, we belong to the second race, singing and dancing ones. But daughter, now a days singing and dancing are not done all the time, then how shall we survive? These people in world neither give us work nor let us be anywhere near to them, then there is only one way to subsist, begging, seeking alms! *Beti* the meaning of shop seeking and signal seeking is going to each shop of the area clapping hands and seeking money from every shopkeeper and spreading arms to beg from every person in a vehicle standing on the signal. (More, 1/16)

At one instance when Nagina, name given to Mukesh after emasculation, is being forced to go for begging, she refuses to draw hands to others wh

erein Najjo asks her promptly how would she earn her living then, to which Nagina replies that she hails from a good family, she won't beg, she can teach children, fetch them from their school, sell milk and do households, anything. Listening this one of her fellow *chelas* Shakila counters "okay, but just tell me who would believe you darling? Who will buy milk from you? Who will let you enter their house? Who will hand over their children to you?" to this Nagina innocently asks "why won't they?". There Shakila says with a sigh "because you are a *hijra*, people think we abduct children and castrate them to make hijra, that is why people fear from us, distance from us, they hate us. Our fate is just singing and dancing, begging on shops and signals darling, nothing else, come I will teach you everything" (More, 2/16) and this is how Nagina also joins them for begging.

The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959 criminalised the act of begging which was even extended to Delhi in 1960 which was further quashed by the Delhi High Court in August 2018. Even the draft of Transgender Protection Bill 2019 earlier had a 'contentious provision' criminalising begging by Transgender persons in its Section 19 under chapter VIII (Offenses and Penalties) which was further removed in the bill passed by the Lok Sabha.

According to a UNDP report on Skilling for Livelihood Opportunities for Transgenders in India:

52% of the transgender respondents of the study begged for a living, making it the main form of livelihood for the community across the five states. This was followed by sex work (14%), giving blessings during traditional festivities or birth of a child (14%) and working in social development with community organisations (9%). About 3% of transgenders engaged in both sex work and begging to make ends meet.(UNDP)

There are several points which this play presents and one of them is the life of abuse of a *hijra*, a transgender faces assault at a very early age. They are used as tools of sodomy, exploited sexually, and are left with a turmoil of psychological apprehensions which lead them to this ghettoed life. There in the play itself there is a character Basanti who is so unhappy with her hijrahood and is so displeased on the voluntary emasculation of Mukesh, Panna's only chela, that she starts questioning to the divinity of Bahucharamata. *Hijras* religiously worship Bahucharamata or '*Murge wali mata*' as she is depicted sitting on a cock. *Hijras* believe that it is because of her wish that they are made so and a *hijra* can get rid of his male genitals only when Bahucharamata blesses one for the opportune

time for emasculation, this is how they seek completeness. But Basanti, a rebel, is unhappy with Bahucharamata for making *hijras* and she calls against her:

I have lost faith in you, Lie you are, a lie! If I have become a hijra, it is a result of my fault. Of my irrationality. I fell prey of a beast and every hijra of the world, like me, is a victim of a some beast, I challenge that I can prove this. (More 2/5)

There is not only a single but various mentions where the characters state that they became what they are because they were sexually exploited in childhood which made them feel feminine and led them to their gender incongruity. In India, where even the rape crimes of women go unreported, the state of transgender sexual abuse doesn't remain unfathomable. In one of my interviews, Payal (changed name), a transwoman who lives somewhere near Uttam Nagar Metro Station in Delhi reported how she was raped by eight men and when she could not file an FIR to the police because else they would have charged her with charges of prostitution and would have demanded to provide them 'the same pleasure' which those men must have received.

Even the Transgender Protection Act 2019 fails to recognize the gravity of 'rape' for transgender persons since it discriminates in punishment for a rape with a woman and with a transgender person. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance, 2018, passed on August 06, 2018 amended IPC, 1860 to increase the minimum punishment for rape of women from seven years to ten years. Justice J.S Verma Committee report advocates equal justice for all and says:

The right to be protected from sexual harassment and sexual assault is, therefore, guaranteed by the Constitution, and is one of the pillars on which the very construct of gender justice stands.

The committee also acknowledges the sexual abuse against transgender and recommends to make 'rape' a gender neutral crime. Which seems to have been taken cognizance in Transgender Protection Act, 2019 but with a discriminatory attitude towards the punishment of a rape crime for woman and for a transgender. Which again brings more vulnerability for Transgender identities towards sexual offences against them. It has a punishment of only six months to two years of imprisonment while it is for seven years in case of a woman.

Apart from this they even face domestic violence at their parental home for being different and also in the system of *Guru-chela* with its stringent rules where they are beaten and assaulted in multiple heart-wrenching



ways. At one instance Basanti while passing by Najjo happens to touch her clothes at Najjo's head for which she badly thrashed despite her apologies for her unintentional mistake. The *Hijra gharanas* have their own set of stringent rules which if not abided by the *chelas* they become liable to get punished from the *guru*, which includes severe beatings, '*hukka paani band*' (social ostracism), shaving-off their head etc.

Even when they are at their respective parental homes they face domestic abuse from their family. When a transgender identifies his/her gender incongruence and if either accepts or becomes evident to everyone one has to face the violent repercussions like Tashi did. I interviewed Tashi at Mittr Trust in Delhi who reported that when she revealed her trans status to her parents, they captivated her for two days, beat her and asked her to leave home at 1.30 am in the night. She asked a male friend to give him shelter for the night who in lieu of it, had sex with her.

Though the Transgender Protection Act, 2019 tries to propose right of a transgender to reside in household with parents or family, a right not to be excluded from family, a right to enjoy and use facilities at home in a non-discriminatory manner but still the actual implementation is yet far from achievable limits due to the social stigma.

The play touches all the possible aspects of the lives of transgender, especially *Hijras*. At one such instance Nagina is married to a business man who promises to pay rupees two lakh to Panna in order to marry her *chela*, but after he had had his first night with Nagina, he never turns up. Neither he had paid Panna the promised amount nor he returned. Panna on the other hand had spent all her money in the arrangements of the marriage. Tired of waiting and pining over the loss, Nagina decides to go to the court asking Panna the documents of agreement between the both saying " I am educated Amma, I know everything. Our community is also entitled to justice these days. I will challenge against him in the court. You have the documents of our marriage with you, give them to me, then see what do I do." To this displeased Najjo complains to Panna:

Your lass talks of Police and court. *Arrey* even married woman stumble in these court of world for justice. And she is *Hijra*, who will believe her marriage? A court which hears the prayers of a *hijra* is not yet born Panni, tell your daughter. (More, 2/12)

This depicts the vulnerability of transgender persons at hands of law even to protect their certain rights as basic as right to marry, to have a family, adoption etc. During my work on transgender I met Shobha Thakur, Mahamandaleshwar kinner Akhada from Himachal Pradesh, who had

adopted a daughter. Shobha ji had found a two-day old girl lying on the road whom she took home as her daughter, the girl now is doing MBA from a prestigious University from Punjab and respects her mother a lot. She states,

As a *Hijra* it was a challenging task to adopt a child, I wanted my daughter to study so much that she could achieve what I have dreamt of, image in society. I have had so much of trouble getting her enrolled in educational institutions since primary classes, as all the forms needed either father's name or parents name, I was none.

The play has an undercurrent of a transgender's suffering which touches on almost all levels of a transgender life, how since birth they struggle and grapple with identity issues, battling with their own psycho-emotional dilemma simultaneously they have to deal with family and societal gaze resulting most of the times into abuse and homelessness. Uprooted, they try to adjust in a hijra household and kill their self-respect instinct to get prepared to beg on streets since they do not have any other source of livelihood. They face domestic abuse and sexual assault and their vulnerable existence makes them prone to such battering at multifarious situations in life. They still fight for rights like right to marry, right to adoption, undiscriminated education and vocational rights and for actual implementation of those which had been promised to them by the state. The implementation level is still awaiting for proper execution which could be seen from the fact that even MHRD and UGC sites do not have a third gender column in their registration forms e.g. on the registration form for National Essay Competition on Constitution day at Kartavya portal of UGC, there were only gender binary categories in the form.

Waman Kendre's direction of the play *Janeman* perfectly acknowledges the impeccable pen-handling of the play which instantly translocates the audience to the life of a Transgender's life and leaves them thinking not so bad about them. The play has a great dramatic effect which surely clears all the preoccupied nuances about this community and purges the audience with the cathartic effect which it emits to the audience. These kinds of plays and visual representations shall help to sensitize common people in a true sense, paving way to a holistic and inclusive society for them all, which has a long road to be travelled.

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