

Embracing Identity and Redefining Boundaries: A Study of Transgender Representation and Marginalization in Ajay K. Pandey's *An Unexpected Gift*

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Abstract

This study explores the portrayal of transgender identity within Indian society through an in-depth examination of Ajay K. Pandey's novel, An Unexpected Gift. Pandey's narrative delves into the life of Sheetal, a transgender woman who tussles with the complexities of identity amidst societal norms and prejudices. Employing the themes of gender, family, and societal expectations, the novel provides a poignant portrayal of Sheetal's journey as she navigates through the challenges of societal rejection and marginalization. Through a literary lens, this paper analyses the nuances of Sheetal's identity crisis, unravelling the layers of her struggle for recognition and acceptance in a society steeped in traditional gender roles.

By investigating Pandey's work within the broader discourse on transgender rights and representation in India, this study aims to illuminate the intricate dynamics of transgender identity within the cultural and social fabric of the nation. It examines the ways in which Sheetal's experiences mirror the broader challenges faced by transgender individuals in attaining societal validation and inclusion. Furthermore, this research seeks to shed light on the transformative potential of literature in fostering empathy and understanding towards marginalised communities. Through a comprehensive analysis of Pandey's narrative techniques, character development, and thematic exploration, this study offers valuable insights into the complexities of transgender identity in Indian society. It underscores the importance of representation and empathy in fostering social change and promoting inclusivity for all individuals, regardless of gender identity.

Keywords: Transgender, Marginalisation, Identity Crisis, Single-Parental Issues, In-between-ness, Third Space.

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India, with its diverse culture, is admired for its brave fight for freedom from Britain. Authors like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao laid the foundation for Indian English Literature, exploring themes of family, gender, and independence. Today, writers like Chetan Bhagat, Ravinder Singh, Durjoy Datta, and Ajay K. Pandey connect with young readers through their sensitive appeal in writing.

Gender in India is a complex and multifaceted issue, deeply intertwined with cultural, social, economic, and political factors. While India has made significant strides in gender equality over the years, there remain numerous challenges and disparities that affect the lives of women, men, and gender minorities across the country. Ajay K. Pandey is an Indian author known for his novels that often explore themes of love, relationships, and personal growth. While his works primarily focus on emotional and inspirational storytelling, they may also touch on gender dynamics and societal expectations regarding gender roles.

Ajay K. Pandey's novel *An Unexpected Gift*, with a compelling narrative, sheds light on the struggles and triumphs of Sheetal, a transgender woman, as she navigates the complexities of identity within an unforgiving social landscape. Pandey's novels often portray characters wrestling with various challenges and conflicts, including those related to gender stereotypes, family expectations, and societal norms. Although gender may not be the primary theme in his works, it can undoubtedly serve as a sub-theme, intertwining with the broader narratives of love, friendship, and self-discovery. In Indian society, transgender people are most often considered to be impure, immoral creatures who are untouchable and are forced to beg for their livelihood. They would either beg on the streets, railways, or public places, or they would end up doing some mean jobs like prostitution. Society has pushed them to the margins, where they rarely have the opportunity to live a decent life. However, recent times have brought about a change in the situation. Despite legal recognition as a third gender, they still continue to encounter discrimination in various domains like education, employment, and healthcare. Despite legal protections, social stigma remains widespread, affecting their acceptance in society. Activists are actively working to raise awareness and advocate for policy changes. One of the transgender activists and writers, Kalki Subramanian, describes the rights and freedoms that transgender individuals need as:

He was born she,
She was born he,
They both fled
From the fangs of
Their families
To have a life
Of their own.
Free to live
Free to love. (Subramaniam 85)

Transgender people's representation in Indian novels has been gaining prominence in recent years, reflecting a growing awareness and acceptance of diverse gender identities in Indian society. While transgender characters and themes have been relatively underrepresented historically, there has been a noticeable increase in literature that explores transgender experiences and challenges.

In the novel *An Unexpected Gift*, Sheetal, a transgender woman, experiences marginalisation and confronts the plight of a typical transgender woman in society. However, she had chosen a respectful job as a babysitter, thereby managing to fight against society's injustice. Her bold decision to marry her long-time friend, Subhajith, demonstrates her resolve. Subhajith bravely faces all societal threats and constant conflicts in order to support Sheetal. He makes the decision to marry Sheetal, defying the expectations of both his typical Indian family and the stereotypes of society. At first, she declines his proposal, despite her deep desire for him. Later, she agrees to renew her prolonged courtship with the promised marriage. Subhajith removed the barrier between genders and granted her the identity of a 'wife' by marriage. Sheetal has all the characteristics of a typical woman, making her an ideal match for Subhajith. It is evident in Abhay's words to Subhajith's father: "Anybody who knows her will define her as the perfect soul. A woman is someone who has a heart that only knows to love and care for others" (170).

Having lost his wife to brain cancer, Abhay finds Sheetal very helpful in taking care of his toddler son at home. Later, after discovering Sheetal's true identity as a transgender woman, Abhay fires her from her babysitting job. This incident prompted Sheetal to reflect on her previous life, a time when she had a strong sense of identity as a son to her loving mother. Though her father hardly showed any affection, her mother loved her dearly. It wasn't until she was five years old that she began to develop an uncommon fondness for being a boy. When all of her friends play with cars, balls, or superheroes, she loves playing with dolls. When she turned thirteen, she wore a girl costume and cherished the heartfelt happiness in her mother's absence. It is evident that even in her childhood, she longed to have the identity of a mother. Being a transgender woman, she was at the peak of happiness when Ayush called her mother for the first time. She exposed her intense joy to the readers through her resonating thoughts:

I was in tears when he asked me, that same night, to allow Ayush to call me mother. It was such a moving moment, such a precious feeling. Yes, a transgender woman could also be a mother. I had never thought I would be lucky enough to have such an experience in my life. My ears had yearned to hear this for so long. Yes, I had always wanted to be called 'mother'. (111)

She continues by stating that her teacher once inquired about her future aspirations. She said that she wished to become a mother. "Transgender" is a term coined by the psychiatrist Dr. John F. Oliven in his work *Sexual Hygiene and*

Pathology (1965). A transgender person is someone who perceives their gender as different from their biological one. For example, someone born as a boy might feel like they are actually a girl, or vice versa. They are often considered to be powerful enough to curse as well as bless people. Indeed, they frequently find themselves compelled to opt for the profession of street dancing as a means of livelihood. Writer A. Revathi accuses the entire society of neglecting the special third-gender people. She also compares being the third gender with the injured and wounded people who earn the care and sympathy of the society that was neglected to them:

Men and even women stared at us and laughed, and heckled us. I realized what a burden a hijra's daily life is. Do people harass those who are men and women when they go out with their families? Why, a crippled person, a blind person – even they attract pity and people help them. If someone has experienced physical hurt, they are cared for both by the family and by outsiders who come to know of it. But we – we are not considered human. (Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story, 54)

However, Sheetal met some good people in her life, which helped her survive with a decent profession. Her mother used to advise her not to 'dance on roads' at any cost. Her long-time friend Subhajith, whom she later married, was also very supportive in all aspects of her life. Though Abhay prejudices her identity in the beginning, he trusts her so much later that he hands over his only son, Ayush, to Sheetal to take care of.

Sheetal has been yearning for recognition as a female. When she wore female costumes at a young age, her mother got angry and warned her not to act like a girl anymore. However, it is evident that her mother accepts her as she is and allows her to be as she wishes. When she identified herself as Eunuch, her mother said, 'You are my daughter'. Transgender individuals often struggle to secure decent jobs in society, leading them to become street dancers. Most families disown their transgender children once they discover their identity, leaving them homeless. However, Sheetal's mother didn't disown her, instead she wants to protect her by changing her identity from male to female. It is evident through her mother's precautions actions by reforming Sheetal's appearance before sending her to her Mama-ji's house for higher studies:

Before I moved, my mother literally gave me a new avatar. She called it my second birth. She took me to a parlour and, with a little bit of grooming, I was to take my eyes off the image that stared back at me. I finally seemed to have found my body. I was looking at the correct version of me. (55)

For a transgender person like Sheetal, gaining friendship from a normal male or female can be challenging. People would distance themselves once they discovered Sheetal's true identity. However, Abhay accepts Sheetal as she is and tries to be a good friend to her:

‘You can count me as your friend too.’

She smiled and then laughed.

‘We cannot be friends?’ I made a sad face.

‘No, sir, you are far too respectable to be my friend.’(126)

In today’s world, there are many government schemes to aid transgender. Though the nation provides chances to develop a strong identity, individuals in society marginalise the third gender with prejudice. The term ‘Marginalisation’, was first coined in the medical field in an article entitled “Marginalization: A guiding concept for valuing diversity in nursing knowledge development” by Hall et al. It refers to the restricted group in the health system as those who are “often hidden, stigmatized, lacking access to services, and mistrustful of the research process” (Hall et al., 1994). Since the publication of this article, the composition of these groups has extended beyond women and members of suppressed ethnic and racial groups. Today, marginalised populations encompass groups eliminated due to factors such as race, gender identity, age, physical ability, or language. Society often confines them to a narrow framework. Ajay K. Pandey’s *An Unexpected Gift* sheds light on the injustices that happen to one of these marginalised individuals, transgender. Through the narration of Sheetal, the readers are exposed to the fact that on April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court declared freedom to identify themselves as ‘third gender’:

...transgender people to be a “third gender”, affirmed that the fundamental rights granted under the Constitution of India will be equally applicable to transgender people, and gave them the right to self-identification of their gender as male, female or third gender. (57)

Despite having social independence, transgender people continue to face marginalization in society. Stereotypes and prejudices against them are persistent, preventing them from obtaining even the most basic rights. Television shows and news outlets have portrayed them as an alien gender that poses a threat to society. Through the character Abhay, Ajay Pandey illuminates his disgusting view of society, which portrays the third gender negatively in all fields as he states:

I was disturbed by the way the news channels were covering incident. I did not understand. Two transgender women were arrested for allegedly trying to kidnap a Do criminals have a gender? They could have said, two criminals were arrested for allegedly trying to kidnap a toddler. Somehow, I could sense prejudice at work behind the news. (164)

Transgender individuals face rejection and marginalisation at every stage of their journey. They were rejected and unnoticed by society. Their emotions and feelings were marred by society’s prejudices. Sheetal is a representation of every transgender person in society. The society needs saviours like Abhay and Subhajith, who have been the life-changers of Sheetal by battling all the societal threats and supporting her in attaining the identity of a daughter, friend, wife, and mother. They

assist Sheetal in enhancing her damaged mental state.

The findings of this research underscore the profound layers of Sheetal's identity crisis and the broader implications it holds for transgender individuals within Indian society. Through an in-depth exploration of Sheetal's journey, transitioning from her assigned gender at birth to embracing her true identity as a transgender woman, the study reveals the multitude of challenges she confronts at different stages of her life. Society systematically denies Sheetal recognition and acceptance despite her innate femininity, depriving her of the fundamental roles and rights typically afforded to cisgender women. This societal rejection marginalizes Sheetal, relegating her to the third space of the third gender, depriving her of the necessary respect and space to fully participate in and enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of womanhood.

This study further highlights the pervasive discrimination and marginalisation faced by transgender individuals in various spheres of life, including family, social relationships, and civic participation. Sheetal's experiences serve as a poignant reflection of the broader societal torments and criticisms that lead to the marginalization of transgender communities. Despite advancements in legal recognition and advocacy efforts, transgender individuals continue to encounter systemic injustices and stigma that prevent their ability to live undaunted with honour.

It becomes evident that transgender individuals, like Sheetal, deserve equal respect and recognition within society, with access to the same opportunities and rights as their cisgender counterparts. This research sheds light on the societal torments and injustices that need to be changed by advocating for the acknowledgment and celebration of transgender identities as integral facets of human diversity. By displaying the hassles and bitter experiences of transgender individuals, this study highlights the importance and necessity of society's advancement towards building a more equitable and inclusive world for all.

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