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“Being Not Normal”: An Exploration of Disabled Characters in Anita Nair’s *Cut Like Wound*

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Abstract: This paper explores the representation of disability and gender as abnormality through the character of Chikka or Bhuvana in Anita Nair’s *Cut Like Wound*. Any deviant behaviour or phenomenon is often considered as abnormality by the common people. Chikka embodies multiple layers of marginalization and stigmatization- physical deviance, gender non-conformity, and traumatic past, which eventually lead him to become a serial killer while finding a place for himself in the society. The study incorporates the perspectives from Disability Studies, Queer Theory, and the biological and psychological aspects of distorted mindset to analyze Chikka as a subject to abnormality. The paper intends to create an inclusive environment for the marginalized by examining the reasons for their emotional turmoil and distorted psyche. The aim of the study is to portray Chikka being both victim and perpetrator, hence, a grey character.

Keywords: Abnormal, Crime, Disability, LGBTQIA+, Psychology.

Introduction

In common parlance, anything that deviates from the widely accepted societal norms of normalcy is considered abnormality which is further equated to disability. The generic perception of disability limits the person’s daily functioning in his or her personal as well as social life. However, the theoretical interpretation provides a new dimension to the generic conception of disability. This paper intends to present a multifaceted exploration of the character of Chikka- a transgender serial killer, who possess plenty of queer attributes that are usually identified as abnormality or disability.



The Narrative of Deviance

Anita Nair has weaved an engrossing murder mystery with intricately detailed characters in her novel *Cut Like Wound*. The story begins with a man dressing as a woman to lure men with sexual intentions. In another scene, there happens to be a murder by a transgender man. The victim is said to be fractured in the skull, followed by killing with some kind of ligature tied around the neck, consequently slitting the throat. As more killings happen in the same mode with an addition of sexual motive behind the crime, the investigators inspector Borei Gowda and sub-inspector Santosh get a strong hint of a serial killer behind all the murders. Further in the novel, the character of Chikka is introduced as the younger brother of the corporator Ravikumar, popularly known as Anna who is an influential man among the commoners with a criminal record. Much later it is revealed that Chikka is a transgender who identifies herself as Bhuvana, and had a nasty childhood; he was sexually abused by rich and old Ranganathan who favoured him and his poor family in exchange of sexual pleasures. Young and naïve Chikka, unable to comprehend the activity, gave in for the pleasure he experienced to the loss of a sound personality. When they were caught red-handed by Anna, Chikka sensed a disgust in his brother's eyes which impacted Chikka's mental well-being. Furthermore, Anna got Ranganathan killed and acquired his possessions which made Chikka detest his brother for separating him from the joys he cherished. As Bhuvana, Chikka found love in Sanjay, but Anna killed him too. All this turned him into an animal on a rampage. He embodied Bhuvana to seek the same pleasure. However, when she was not accepted as a woman and loathed by sexually driven men, she murdered them by strangling. In the final scenes, Chikka becomes Kamakshi to get over the loss of Sanjay, and is followed by Santosh and Gowda. To Anna's shock, Chikka reveals his true self and explains the reason behind his killings; he vented that by killing lusty men he was ending the disgust he was subjected to by his brother. Ultimately, he kills Anna and is taken away by the police.

Chikka is one such character who when subjected to varied perspectives gives diverse interpretations. At first, Chikka appears to be an antagonist. However, as the character unfolds layer by layer, he emerges out as a grey-shaded personality representing a significantly marginalized community. Through a common man's perception, Chikka would be declared 'not normal' or 'deviant' with unlawful engagement in criminal activities like assault or murder.



Before unlayering the emotional aspects of Chikka's identity, first we need to assess his physical appearance and how was he tagged 'abnormal'. Our society qualifies heightened, muscular, and hairy attributes to be manly or masculinity. On the contrary, Chikka was quite opposite of the usual visual of a man. Since he was born prematurely, he stopped growing at five feet and had a narrow bony framework. "Neither a real dwarf, who might at least have got a government job under the handicapped quota, nor a proper grown man" (Nair 82). This description gives a perfect picture of Chikka's pitiful condition where he cannot sort out his normal appearance visually. The society rendered him disabled on the basis of its preconception of normativity. The outer appearance of Chikka initially differentiated him from the male population of the society for not being normal. This kind of marginalization is termed as *Lookism* which discriminates people on the basis of their physical appearance irrespective of other personality attributes, considering them unattractive. Coined by *The Washington Post Magazine*, the prejudice that has prevailed from long was recognized much later in 1978 ("Lookism"). Chikka was a victim of lookism as he had brains to execute extraordinary tasks but was overlooked due to his small stature. Chikka could do complex mental calculations in seconds. However, his exceptional ability was presented by Anna in such a manner that Chikka felt being reduced to "performing animals" (Nair 83). Additionally, Chikka donned sarees as Bhuvana which gave him a better look and made him appear taller appropriate to feminine stature. Studies have shown that men tend to prefer shorter women as height is associated with dominance and power, leading to the stereotypical notion that shorter women can be controlled easily (News). Since the saree illusioned Bhuvana to be taller and could overpower the lusty men, they detested her on knowing her real identity.

Gender and Sexuality: Phases of Identity

Adding to the physical appearance, gender and sexuality is another constituent that constructs a person's identity. However, when identity is looked through an assessive lens, it deduces both the attributes that are socially constructed. While sex is determined by the physical appearance of genitalia and other contributing factors such as hormones and chromosomes, gender is based on how a person identifies oneself in the society. Sex is biological, and gender is mental. A person may be born and brought up as a male, although he could feel and act feminine. Moreover, Queer theory challenges the rigid acceptance of heterosexuality as the only correct sexual orientation. It is not limited to only well-distinguished gender and



sex. Although the gender and queer theorists across the globe have been easy on the note of gender non-conformity, our society as ideological space is conventional in heteronormative perception and labels such people with deviant sexuality, hence abnormal. Chikka was born as male. However, the trauma he endured due to the sexual abuse during his boyhood shaped his identity and ultimately, he identified himself as a woman and craved sexual gratification from men. An Indian transgender rights activist, Laxminarayan Tripathi questions in her autobiography, “I am effeminate, ...and people tease me. I am also sexually attracted to men. Why am I not like everyone else? Am I abnormal?” (Tripathi 11) The core subjects of gender and sexuality have been such a taboo in the Indian society that it impacts the minds of the regular masses as well as the vulnerable non-conforming genders which makes them question their existence. As disability is more of a social construct rather than a medical condition; the social environment around the disabled, suffocates and obstructs their easy living. The article titled “Social Construction of Disability” states:

Social construction of disability allows one to shift away from viewing ability as normal toward questioning what social and environmental factors make some abled while others are disabled. By definition, individuals with disabilities have a different way of physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially experiencing and making meaning of the world. Their perceptions and priorities may be different from what is deemed “normal.” Does this mean the individual is disabled or differently abled? (Dray)

Chikka’s transsexuality is viewed as abnormality, and hence, a disability as per the common parlance. The non-binary gendered and the LGBTQIA+ cluster is often marginalized to varied extent. Much rightly detailed by Varsha Sharma and Arun Kumar Poonia as, “The Indian society, firstly, holds heterogeneity as a standard norm for both men and women. Any deviation from this position is punished by the society, and those who believe in the concept of homosexuality are seen as deviant and abnormal” (Sharma). The non-binary gendered people being marginalized and stigmatized propagates that compulsory heterosexuality has been deeply imbibed in the patriarchal minds, leaving no space to acknowledge other orientations. Ironically, even though the gender spectrum is advocated to be accepted, people with physical abnormalities are posited to be ‘freaks of nature’. Gowda states, “A freak is someone who is a monster; an abnormally developed creature. A freak is someone with two heads or an extra limb.... The sexual preference of a man or a woman doesn’t make them freaks!...” (Nair 188)



The Old Age Ritualism of the Transgenders

Transgenders are highly differentiated than the 'normals' and are seldomly accepted as a part of the society. Alongwith the transgenders but the whole genderfluid community is targeted by the straight and cisgender population. Paradoxically, the same community of transgenders had a reputed position in the ancient times. The research paper by M. Michelraj briefly discusses the mentions of transgenders in the ancient scriptures. Known as *Hijras*, eunuchs, *Kothis*, *Aravanis*, *Jogappas*, *Shiv-Shaktis* etc. in different parts of India, transgenders have been trustworthy guards for women in the royal households. *Kama Sutra* refers transgenders as *tritiyaprakriti* or third nature. *Manu Smriti* states that if the male and female gametes are equal in number then the third-sex child or twins comprising of a boy and a girl is produced. Moreover, the astronomical planets of Mercury, Saturn and Ketu are associated with the third gender. The Hindu epic *Ramayana* contains a vignette of lord Rama being impressed by the loyal hijras for following him during exile when he asked no men and women to do so. He granted them the power to bless people on auspicious occasions. In the *Mahabharata*, lord Krishna adapted the role of Mohini to marry Aravan, the son of Arjun and Nagakanya, who wished to be married the night before he was to be sacrificed to secure the victory of the Pandavas. Transgenders served the Mughal empire by holding the crucial political status and power to influence big decisions. They were much privileged in the early British rule as well; provision of land, food and money were incorporated for the hijra community. However, the European colonials did not favour the transgenders and viewed them as uncivilized elements disrupting the decorum of the society. Hence the transgenders were separated and included in the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 which was later replaced by another law in 1952 but stained the social image of the community. The Karnataka Police Act, 1964 made strict provisions to monitor eunuchs and their activities in the area (Michelraj). In 2014, the Supreme Court of India declared transgenders as the third gender granting them fundamental rights and reservation in educational institutions and employment opportunities. Apart from their days of glory and disgrace, transgenders make every effort to regain a prominent position in the society.

The Turmoil of Stereotypes

Along with Chikka being a transgender, he broke a number of stereotypes. The manly physique of Chikka was not as per the quintessential image of the man the society holds. Furthermore, he was belittled for



his sexual preferences. While his brother could not accept his transsexuality, Chikka found solace in the elder eunuch in the house, Akka, who supported him in embracing his feminine identity. At the beginning of the novel, Chikka is seen taking commands from a goddess to become Bhuvana. This delusional behaviour sets him apart from the normal beings. Chikka relying for acceptance and approval from the heavenly powers signify that he is deprived of the affection he craves from the humans on the earth.

The criminal attitude of Chikka also deviates him from normality. In general, the criminal offenders are often noted to have been suffering from the combination of biological, psychological and social imbalance. An article in *The Guardian* states, “Many serial killers are survivors of early childhood trauma of some kind—physical or sexual abuse, family dysfunction, emotionally distant or absent parents” (Conroy). The sexual abuse that Chikka endured in his childhood and non-acceptance from his brother had severely impacted his brain. He developed a hatred for men who put lascivious gaze on him as Bhuvana. Anna always believed that Chikka was innocent. However, Chikka perceived it as a benevolent act to kill the lewd men who reflected the same disgust that Anna had experienced. Furthermore, he held the goddess to be his guiding force in becoming a woman and it was a divine command to “erase that memory” (Nair 350). Chikka, in his mind, is free of guilt. The R.K. Ressler states “sexual homicide is an act of control, dominance and performance that is representative of an underlying fantasy embedded with violence, sexuality and death” (qtd. in Malizia). A crucial point to be noted is that Anna made Chikka recall the trauma which refreshed his wounds. In 1980s, a British neuroscientist Prof. Adrian Raine and his team scanned the brains of several killers, and suggested that early childhood abuse physically damaged the brain, particularly the prefrontal cortex or PFC (BBC News). Anna Werrett in her article asserts trauma bearing various biological impacts on the brain. The PFC is mainly responsible for decision making and executing actions. The disrupted PFC is smaller in size, making it difficult to manage emotions and react impulsively. The PFC also controls the functioning of the amygdala which regulates emotions. A traumatized person might experience anxiety, mood swings, and difficulty in making rational decisions (Werrett). Chikka was emotionally reactive and struggled to maintain his equilibrium. Most of his decisions were a result of anger outbursts. As Bhuvana, he killed men when they did not accept him as a woman, and ultimately, he shot Anna for distancing him from everything he loved. He let out his rage before killing Anna in the following lines, “How does it feel, Anna, to know that

you are powerless? How does it feel to know that your life is not in your control? How does it feel to be Chikka?” (Nair 351) Chikka yearned for power since he was deprived of choices of self-reliance; Anna would do this for him and he had to simply comply. To assert dominance, Bhuvana employed two makeshift weapons; she would first hit her victim with a ball wrapped in a sock to make him lose consciousness, then she would strangle him with a ligature with glass particles stuck to it. After much contemplation, Gowda inferred, “Childhood trauma, Low self-esteem. Power hungry. The desperate need to feel in control and hence the use of the ligature” (Nair 300). When her victims would struggle with the pain, “This was how she liked them. Powerless, acquiescent and hers to do with as she pleased” (Nair 347).

There is a general belief that criminals are not born but ‘produced’. Rather than being inherently evil, individuals often turn to illegal activities due to numerous factors. The biological factors have been discussed above. The psychological aspects of the criminal mind provide better explanation behind the unlawful intentions. An article in the Psychology Today states

...the most consistent psychological feature among serial killers appears to be extreme antisocial behavior- they tend to lack empathy, appear incapable of remorse, show no regard for laws or social norms, and have a strong desire to revenge themselves against individuals or society at large by carrying out violent, terrifying crimes. (“Serial Killers”)

Furthermore, most serial killers tend to display psychopathic and sociopathic signs which majorly qualifies for personality disorders. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders discusses a wide array of personality disorders- paranoid, schizoid, schizotypal personality disorders to name a few. Chikka exhibited antisocial personality disorder which “...is a pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others, criminality, impulsivity, and a failure to learn from experience”, along with narcissistic personality disorder which comprises “...a pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy” (American Psychiatric Association). Chikka displayed an attitude of non-empathic serial killer as Bhuvana. She found pleasure in killing her victims:

She walked behind them. She didn’t like looking at them. She didn’t like the thought that they would see how it made her feel. Pleasure had to be private, for oneself rather than to be shared. All that



kicking and writhing, screaming and struggling turned it into a disorderly thing. This was how she liked them. Powerless, acquiescent and hers to do with as she pleased.

She hadn't thought she would find so much pleasure in it that first time.... It felt a little like flying a kite but with better results.... In the last moment, as life ebbed out, she was the kite. Soaring above the world. Queen of the moment. (Nair 346)

Conclusion

In the realm of contemporary times, the character of Chikka comes out as a subject of multidisciplinary studies. The purpose of this assessment is to give a voice to the much-exploited section of the society- the transgenders. Anita Nair has strived to create Chikka personating a balanced mix of psychopathy with vulnerability. *Cut Like Wound* stands out as Nair has given equal or more weightage to the antagonist. Chikka is like a tree which is growing astray because he was not groomed properly. His suppressed angst of unacceptance is vented out through criminal acts. The aim of this paper was to explore transgenders biologically less and psychologically more with an extension to sickness or disability. The interpretations would aid in comprehending and forming a subtle yet sane relationship with morally grey characters. Future research could examine Chikka or Bhuvana, or other characters with respect to varying disciplines and themes.

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