
UNIT 4 ANDROGYNY

Himadri Roy

Structure

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous block you have read about the mother's body and the socio-cultural and philosophical debates relating to it. In this unit we will move beyond the parameters of biological definitions of body which categorise the body into binary opposites, i.e., male and female. The present unit focuses upon a certain type of body that cannot be classified as either 'male' or 'female', i.e. the androgynous body. The androgynous body is one in which the elements of female and male exist together. The 'androgynous body' can be viewed from multiple perspectives such as: bio-medical, psychological and cultural. In this unit, we will focus primarily on the conceptual understanding of the androgynous body in relation to *Hijras* in India in order to understand some of the socio-cultural stereotypes and challenges faced by this community. Further discussion regarding the male/female binary, bio-medical, psychological and cultural meanings of androgyny are dealt with in the annexure which follows the unit. You are encouraged to read the unit and the annexure in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the concept of androgyny.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Understand the meanings of androgyny;
- Explain the concept of the body within the framework of binary opposites;
- Provide some examples from ancient mythology which explain the origin of androgyny; and
- Analyse the socio-cultural stereotypes and other forms of marginalisation of androgynous body in the context of the *hijra* community.

4.3 THE *HIJRA* COMMUNITY IN INDIA

The term androgyny may be used and understood in a variety of ways. The focus here is on understanding the concept of androgyny through the category of the *hijra*. Most of you would be familiar with the term ‘*hijras*’. These androgynous or transsexual people are very much part of the socio-cultural milieu of our society. In India, films both in the past and present have depicted the cultural constructions of the androgynous body in reference to *hijra* communities. The recent film, **Welcome to Sajanpur** has shown the character of a *hijra*, Muni bai, who faces political marginalisation while contesting for the local body election. She expresses her ‘feeling of social apathy’ in her letter to the collector of the district, and she demands a change of attitude of society towards the *hijra* communities. There are various representations about *hijra* communities in films, religious texts, and culture that explain their limited role in society.

The word *hijra* originated from Urdu, *ezra*, meaning, a wanderer or a nomad, based on the community’s lifestyle as nomadic vagabonds. *Hijra* or *ezra* can easily be translated into English terms such as: ‘eunuchs’ and ‘hermaphrodites’. During ancient times, they were considered as *kinnars*, but later on in different states of India, they were called by the local languages like, *khasuaa* or *khasaraa* or *jankha* in Punjab and its neighbouring states, in Bangla they are called *Napungshok*, in Telegu *napunsakudu*, or *kojja*, or *maada*, in Tamil Nadu they are called as *Thiru nangai*, *Ali*, *aravanni*, *aravani*, or *aruvani*, in Gujrati they are called *pavaiyaa*.

Usually, when we think of a body, we conceptualise it in binary categories, ignoring the people who exist on the borderline. **Serena Nanda**, in her book, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, points out that we all have tendencies to comprehend only conventional notions of existence of the body (Nanda, 1993). Conventional heteronormative descriptions of the body justify thinking of the androgynous body as nothing but a “wrong body” and there is always a heteronormative desire to either name the body as woman or man. Theorist, **Sandy Stone**, disagrees with this idea, adding that it is in fact a phenomenon of “sacrificing the complexities and ambiguities” of this body’s “lived experience(s)” (Patricia, 2010, 33-59). Thus, we tend to overlook the position of those who embody such complexities in any society. In the average person’s understanding, a body such as this suffers from what Butler calls ‘gender identity disorder’ (Butler, 1990, as cited in Macdonald-labelle, 2011, p.40).

The androgynous body has been viewed as abnormal, unnatural and abhorrent. In India, such bodies are stigmatised and therefore devalued. Due to the social stigma they carry, the *hijra* community lives in fear and hence tends to cluster together in ghettos and move around in groups. A long struggle and grass-root activism have resulted in their recognition as

the “third sex/gender”, for instance the Census of 2011 introduces the column “other category” under gender. This kind of recognition is likely to reduce the stigma and marginalisation of the *hijra* community imposed by a heteronormative social order.

4.4 REPRESENTATIONS OF ANDROGYNY IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

In this section, we will discuss ancient religious beliefs about androgyny to shed some light on the position of the *hijra* community in India. Many creation myths from all over the world conceptualise creation as a union of male and female principles, and creation myths about androgyny can also be found in several cultures (see annexure). Ancient Hindu mythology includes both types of stories. Alka Pande in her book, *Ardhanarishvara: The Androgyne Probing the Gender Within*, points out two myths about androgyny from two different schools of thought that reflect the cultural expression about the origin of human beings from the divine concept of Ardhanarishvara, half man half woman.

According to the Shaiva School of thought:

“The origin of human race is attributed to Brahma, the Creator in the Hindu pantheon, who after creating Prajapatis, the first images created by Brahma, did not know how to proceed further... He lacked the power to create women, until Siva appeared before him in the androgynous form of Ardhanarishvara, ‘the Lord whose half is woman’, the right being the male manifestation. On seeing the Supreme Lord Siva, Brahma realised that Ardhanarishvara held the potential for becoming a couple that could unite sexually and in order to secure this went into tapasya, or penance. Pleased by Brahma’s austerities, Siva, the omnipresent and the embodiment of knowledge, created the goddess Sati, the true, from the left side of his body” (Pande, p. 20).

On the other hand, the Vaishnava school of thought holds that Lord Vishnu is the source of the androgynous body. Pande says:

“Lord Vishnu is known to have taken on the female form of Mohini at the crucial time of the churning of the ocean by the gods and demons. An agreement had been reached that the goods and riches churned up would alternately shared. When amrit, the nectar of eternal life, came up, it was the turn of the demons. However to deprive the demons of the nectar, they create havoc once immortalised, Vishnu took the Mohini form to distract the attention of the asuras (demons)” (Pande, p. 24).

Myths about the origin of androgyny get embedded in cultural consciousness over a period of time, and are often used to explain the existence of the androgynous body. There are several myths regarding the birth of the androgynous body. According to Nanda, there exists another myth with regard to the birth of *hijras*,

'In the time of the Ramayana, Ram fought with the demon Ravana and went to Lanka to bring his wife, Sita, back to India. Before this, his father commanded Ram to leave Ayodhya [his native city] and go into the forest for 14 years. As he went, the whole city followed him because they loved him so. As Ram came to the banks of the river at the edge of the forest, he turned to the people and said, "Ladies and gents, please wipe your tears and go away." But those people who were not men and not women did not know what to do. So they stayed there because Ram did not ask them to go. They remained there 14 years and when Ram returned from Lanka he found those people there, all meditating. And so they were blessed by Ram' (Nanda, 1993, p. 542).

Nanda also notes that there are similar myths that can be found in other parts of India. In Tamil Nadu, there is a famous festival in which *hijras* who identify themselves with Krishna play the role of widows of the male deity Koothandavar. The story behind this festival goes like this: there were two kingdoms and to escape the fear of defeat, one of the kings made the promise to sacrifice his eldest son to god. However, the king asked for his son's marriage before he gets sacrificed. Lord Krishna then comes to the earth in form of a woman to marry the king's son. Therefore, in this festival, men who promise to the god dress like a woman to marry him. *Hijra* all over India participate in numbers in this festival. They dress in their best clothes and jewellery and reiterate their identification with the androgynous Krishna represented in this story (Nanda, 1990, p. 176).

Similarly, there are other related myths with regard to the third gender category and alternative sexual practices. Nanda cites a myth from Odisha:

Krishna's son, Samba, was very notorious for his homosexuality and often dresses as a female, especially a pregnant woman, and took the name of Sambali. In this regard, there is a ritual performed at the Jagannatha temple in which Balabhadra, the elder brother of Lord Jagannatha, is identified with Shiva and is homosexually seduced by a young man dressed in a female temple dancer form (Marglin, 1985, p. 53, cited in Nanda, 1990, p. 177). This myth reflects the presence of alternative sexual practices within Hindu myths.

Although there are several myths regarding the emergence of *hijras* since time immemorial, their existence today has acquired a historical presence,

and respect through religious belief. In fact the derogatory term, *chakka*, also has a religious history behind it. It is thought that hijras come out on the streets for their survival and livelihood and beg only on the sixth day of the week, because the Lord Shanimahadeva has cursed them. So, to impress the Lord, one *Hijra* is mythologically supposed to beg for 1008 sixth days of one entire life, after which the *hijra* derives enlightenment.

In several Hindu myths, sexually ambiguous figures have been accorded a privileged position and symbolise powerful deities. According to Nanda, ancient Hinduism has identified the category of the third sex which is further divided into four categories. Despite this, the social stigma attached to the third sex over the centuries has not abated. As we have seen above, religion and mythology have been able to provide a powerful model to understand the *hijra* community while specifying their position and role in ritual performances. In some sense, these myths have contributed toward the consolidation of the *hijra* community as a significant social group and gendered category in Indian society. In the Annexure to this unit, you will be able to read about ancient Greek and Roman myths of androgyny, and the similar role played by such myths in Western culture.

4.5 CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

In this section, we will focus on *hijras* in the contemporary context. You might be familiar with their existence in society, especially at traffic signals in big cities or at busy intersections or market places. With the phobia surrounding AIDS during the late 1980s in this country, their existence became prominently noticeable, because the existence of *hijras* was recognised as an integral part of the society. Soon, it took a different colouring under the jurisprudence of different political parties. Some tried to overrule their presence while some ignored them, and some did count them but not as a threat. Political agendas thus often dictated the manner of their representations within the discourse of nation-building. Although their presence was considered pivotal, giving them legality was far beyond the comprehension of the heteronormative society and no regulatory procedures were taken to give them the social and political space that they deserve.

As you have seen in the previous section, the history and cultural constructions of *hijras* in India can be traced from ancient Hinduism in which the role of eunuchs has been manifested through various myths. The ritual presence and participation of *hijras* in birth ceremonies owes its origin to ancient Hindu beliefs and practices. In contemporary times, the political participation and representation of *hijras* has started gaining ground. For instance, Shabnam Mausi became Member of Parliament from Sohagpur in Madhya Pradesh in 2000, and Kamla Jaan was elected Mayor of Katni in

Madhya Pradesh in 2000. In recent years, several NGOs of the country have come together to fight for the social space and recognition of the *hijras*. Their efforts bore fruits with the inclusion of *hijras* in the 2011 Census and recognition by the High court of Chennai.

Activity

Collect information about Hijra community from the news paper and analyze some of the current challenges faced by them in India.

4.5.1 Ethical Issues: Discrimination and Marginalization of Hijras

The stigma attached to the non-normative, androgynous body have led to medical and surgical modifications in an effort to make such bodies conform to normative, gendered categories. Although legal interventions can be used to prevent unethical practices, one wonders if in a democratic country like India, it is possible to make the law stringent enough to avoid the surgical modification of the androgynous body. The answer would be no, because the constitution gives the right to all individuals to have the freedom over their bodily existence. If someone desires to change his or her sex through surgical modification, the law cannot prohibit him or her from doing so.

At a philosophical level, the existential approach to understanding the androgynous body would argue that the androgynous body is more or less viewed as a defunct structure from the point of view of heteronormative culture. Existential philosophy describes the presence of an entity through its objectification and subjectification. In the case of *hijras*, one can see how they are objectified as unnatural bodies since the androgynous body lies outside the parameters, of the 'normative' male or female body. About the subjectivity of the androgynous body, it can be concluded that their presence doesn't matter to any heteronormative society since their subjectivity is easily ignored. In the case of arts and media, you have already seen how in cinema, theatre, architecture, painting, and sculpture, they may be differently represented. For instance, the *Ardhanarishvara* statue of white sandstone from Kannauj, or the 700-750 A.D. from Jhalawar, or the seventh century Pratihara style statue of *Ardhanarishvara* from Abhaneri, Rajasthan, or the painting from Mandi, Himachal Pradesh (Pande, 72, 78 & 90) and many more are evidence of a contrary conceptualisation and subjectification of the androgynous body in India.

Beyond philosophical and ethical questions, remains the very real issue of the marginalisation of the *hijra* body through casteism. As you have read so far, *hijras* didn't get any position except in the limited domains of specific religious rites and rituals. These constructions over a period of time have built a symbiotic relationship between the body and its accepted roles. Such representations in the everyday life and popular culture have institutionalised the marginalisation and discrimination of *hijras* in the society. Because of their marginal status, majority of *hijras* in India remain uneducated and illiterate. This also has serious implications for their employability. Social and psychological barriers also have an impact on their ability to live normal lives and earn a livelihood.

Activity

Watch some of old and new movies. Compare the representation of Hijra community in the films of old vis-à-vis new and analyse the changes which have come over time with regard to their representation.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

Androgyny encompasses a complex array of concepts which can be examined from multiple perspectives, including cultural, sociological, historical, psychological and bio-medical. This unit has focussed primarily on cultural representations of *Hijras* in India, and the discrimination and social stigmas faced by this community. This has been done in order to examine one aspect of androgyny that we can all relate to. The Annexure, which follows this unit, will provide you with a brief overview of other possible ways of looking at androgyny. You are encouraged to read the annexure along with the unit in order to be able to place what you have read here, in the context of a broader understanding of androgyny.

4.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Read the examples of myth about androgyny given in this unit and in the Annexure which follows. Compare and contrast Indian and Western representations of the androgynous body based on your readings.
- 2) Discuss the discrimination and marginalisation of the hijra community in India in contemporary times. Explain the reasons for this marginalisation. What according to you, would be some ways to reduce the discrimination against this community and integrate them into mainstream society?

- 3) Read the article by Nanda, Serena, 'Hijras as Neither Man nor Woman' given in the references. Analyse the cultural representations of the Hijra community in India.
- 4) Why have some women writers found the idea of androgyny to be attractive from the perspective of creativity? Discuss with the help of examples provided in the Annexure to this unit and in relation to any other authors that you have read.
- 5) Read any case analysis about biomedical sexual reconstruction of gender. Does the case study show that individuals are placed into fixed categories (female/male) based on social expectations and norms? Discuss with the help of Part B of the Annexure provided at the end of this unit.

4.8 REFERENCES

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4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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INTRODUCTION

As you read in the introduction to the previous unit, there are various perspectives from which we can examine the concept of androgyny, the physically transgendered body being just one of them. In fact, the idea of the androgynous body and mind has captured the human imagination across cultures, and over the centuries. Androgyny has been represented in ancient times through mythology, art and religion. In more recent times, the idea of the androgynous body has been examined in literature, in psychoanalysis, as well as in science besides other areas. In order to obtain a general overview of these multiple perspectives let us look at some examples of the discussions on androgyny under two broad headings- Cultural Representations and Biomedical Constructions.

PART A: CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ANDROGYNY

Myth, Psychology, Literature

Ancient myths and religions from different parts of the world reveal a fascination with the concept of gods and humans who can straddle the male-female gender binary. Throughout the ages, philosophers, writers and poets have explored the idea of a more 'complete' human mind at the level of a 'bisexual' literary imagination. With the advent of the discipline of psychology in modern times, 'bisexuality' came to be explored by Sigmund Freud and many of his contemporaries. In recent times, women writers as diverse as Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous have explored the idea of bisexuality as an unrestricted space which can offer women the freedom to escape from rigid and stereotypical definitions of gendered imaginations and writing styles.

Presented below are a few examples from mythology, psychology and literature which will give you an idea of the vast scope of cultural representations of androgyny across the world, and through different time periods. Since a complete overview of such cultural representations would require a much more detailed study, these examples are meant to be seen as representative of specific cultural beliefs and literary representations. However, they do help us in seeing the extent to which the idea of androgyny has been embedded in cultural discourses throughout the ages.

Hindu Mythology: The *Ardhanarishvara*

As you have already seen in the unit on the previous unit on Androgyny, Shiva's manifestation as the *ardhanarishvara*, or the "half-woman god" in ancient Hindu mythology is a famous one. In this image, Shiva, otherwise a phallic god representing the immense power of the *lingam*, is seen as encompassing both male and female attributes and principles. Endowed

with female and male anatomical parts, Shiva combines the energy of the female *yoni* with the power of the male *lingam*, thus revealing that in fact, Shakti, most often manifested separately in the form of Shiva's consort in the form of Devi or Parvati, is an integral part of the nature of godliness:

"The union of Siva and Sakti is their basic reality. This is symbolized in the Hermaphrodite (Ardhanarisvara), half-male, half-female, whose nature is pure lust." (Danielou, 1991, p. 203)

Greek Myth of Aristophanes (Plato's *Symposium*)

One of the most famous stories about androgyny is the creation myth found in the *Symposium*, a classic text by the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. The *Symposium* brings together various speeches by famous orators and thinkers of the time, as conceived and narrated by Plato. In one such speech, Plato attributes the following creation myth to the philosopher Aristophanes. The myth has become known for throwing light on ancient Greek cultural beliefs about the origins of genders, and has been cited extensively in many literary, cultural and philosophical works throughout the ages.

According to this myth, Aristophanes claims that Zeus (the reigning Greek god) first created three genders. All human beings possessed four arms and four legs, two faces looking in opposite directions, and two sets of genital organs. Those with two sets of male genitals were sprung from the sun, those with two sets of female genitals from the earth, and the third, which possessed one set of male and one set of female genital organs, originated from the moon. These round-shaped and complete humans lacked for nothing and thus became proud and arrogant over time, causing concern to the gods. Not wanting to destroy the human race completely, Zeus comes up with a plan - he then decides to split each human body into two in order to cut down their strength by virtue of which they have become insolent. Those with all male physical attributes then give rise to the male sex, those with female parts give rise to the female sex, and those with one of each are turned into one male and one female body. With Apollo's help, the faces of these humans and the genital organs are then turned around to the front of the body, in order to facilitate reproduction between males and females. According to Plato's conceptualization of Eros, or love, each split person continues to experience a sense of incompleteness and searches for his or her lost half in a desire to join with the missing other and become complete again. Thus, those who were both male and female continue to desire their opposites, leading to heterosexual love and reproduction. Those who were completely male or completely female, will desire someone of the same sex, not with the aim of reproduction, but rather, for satisfaction of a deep-rooted desire on the basis of which homosexual love is explained. Plato is thus able to offer culturally acceptable explanations of both

heterosexuality and homosexuality through the notion of androgyny, as it appears in the speech of Aristophanes.

Speech of Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium

“The sexes were three in number and of such a kind for these reasons; originally the male was sprung from the sun, the female from the earth, and the third, partaking of both male and female, from the moon, because the moon partakes of both the sun and the earth; and indeed because they were just like their parents, their shape was spherical and their movement circular.” ...

“After painful deliberation Zeus declared that he had a plan. “I think that I have a way,” he said, “whereby mortals may continue to exist but will cease from their insolence by being made weaker. For I shall cut each of them in two, and they will be at the same time both weaker and more useful to us because of their greater numbers, and they will walk upright on two legs.” ...

“And so when their original nature had been split in two, each longed for his other half, and when they encountered it they threw their arms about one another and embraced in their desire to grow together again and they died through hunger and neglect of the other necessities of life because of their wish to do nothing separated from each other.”

(Morford & Lenardon, 2003, p.187-88)

The Myth of Hermaphroditus (from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*):

Another equally famous story explaining the origin of the physically androgynous body is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Latin work from around the 7th century AD. In this tale, Hermaphroditus is a handsome youth of fifteen, and the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. Salmacis, a young and beautiful nymph falls in love with him while she is admiring her reflection in a pool of water and finds him wandering nearby. Salmacis tries her best to seduce Hermaphroditus but he spurns her and tries to escape her advances. Undeterred, Salmacis jumps into the pool while he is swimming and grasps him in a tight embrace. She then begs the gods to join him with her permanently and make them into one being. The gods grant her desire and their two bodies are united together so that Hermaphroditus forever becomes androgynous and 'enfeebled'.

Here, while we once again see the desire to come to terms with androgyny through mythical explanations, Ovid's version of the hermaphrodite as a more feeble version of the male body seems to be at odds with Plato's much more affirmative view of multiple genders and sexualities. Both myths, however, clearly show the prevalent cultural acceptance of the androgynous body, as well as of alternate sexual identities and desires, in ancient Greek

and Roman culture. Below is an excerpt from the famous story of Hermaphroditus, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

**OVID'S METAMORPHOSES:
TALE OF THE HERMAPHRODITE, 7 AD**

One day while he was wandering through the land of Lycia, now modern-day Turkey, he came across "a pool of water crystal clear to the very bottom." Hidden from his sight, gathering flowers at the edge of the pool, was Salmacis, a young naiad of Diana, goddess of the hunt. ... On this day instead of herself she saw Hermaphroditus and "longed to possess him." When she approached him full of her desire, the "boy blushed rosy red; for he knew not what love is." ...

Enflamed by the sight of his naked body in the water, Salmacis could control herself no longer. "Casting off all her garments," she dove in after him, grasping Hermaphroditus to her against his will. ...

While holding him in this violent embrace Salmacis called out to the gods to make her and Hermaphroditus into one being. The gods acquiesced, making the two bodies "knit in close embrace: they were no longer two, nor such as to be called, one, woman, and one, man. They seemed neither, and yet both." After this sudden transformation, when Hermaphroditus felt that he had become "but half-man" and "enfeebled," he cried out to his powerful parents Hermes and Aphrodite to curse these waters, ... His parents granted his wish, and cursed the pool, known from then on as the dangerous uncanny waters of Salmacis, that would turn each man who swam or drank there into a hermaphrodite.

<http://www.ltrr.org/journal/4/mesh-the-tale-of-the-hermaphrodite>

Psychoanalysis: Bisexuality in Freud's Theory of Infantile Sexuality

Sigmund Freud's theories of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex are well-known, and have been recognized as some of the most influential in the development of the disciplines of psychology and psychoanalysis during the twentieth century. Freud's theories of infantile sexuality, and the differentiation between male and female sexual development during puberty, also reveal his deepening interest in the aspect of both anatomical and psychical bisexuality, which he was to touch upon in his earlier works and develop in greater detail in his later ones. About anatomical androgyny, or 'hermaphroditism' as Freud refers to it, he claims that to a limited extent, this has occurred normally over the course of human evolution, and that the bodies of both men and women clearly show the presence of some physical aspects belonging to the opposite sex.

What remains much more puzzling for Freud was the parallel aspect of psychic bisexuality and its relationship to homosexuality. While he attempted to draw connections between the two, he was not entirely convinced that there was a straight one-to-one relationship between them. However, he was certainly convinced of the important role that psychic bisexuality plays in the sexual desires and roles of men and women. The excerpts below give us an idea of Freud's observations, interest and even bewilderment in the face of what he clearly recognizes as the androgynous aspect of all humans and their psychical behaviour.

Freud's Views on Bisexuality

“For it appears that a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism occurs normally. In every normal male or female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex. These either persist without function as rudimentary organs or become modified and take on other functions.

These long-familiar facts of anatomy lead us to suppose that an originally bisexual physical disposition has, in the course of evolution, become modified into a unisexual one, leaving behind only a few traces of the sex that has become atrophied.

It was tempting to extend this hypothesis to the mental sphere and to explain inversion in all its varieties as the expression of a psychical hermaphroditism....”

“But this expectation was disappointed. It is impossible to demonstrate so close a connection between the hypothetical psychical hermaphroditism and the established anatomical one.” (Freud, 1962, p. 7-8)

“Since I have become acquainted with the notion of bisexuality, I have regarded it as the decisive factor, and without taking bisexuality into account I think it would scarcely be possible to arrive at an understanding of the sexual manifestations that are actually to be observed in men and women.” (Freud, 1962, p. 86)

Literature: Androgyny and Creativity

The idea of the androgynous mind as being more open to creative impulses has drawn the attention and imagination of philosophers, writers and artists alike. From Samuel Coleridge to Virginia Woolf, this aspect of a psychical bisexuality as a rich and fertile terrain of creativity has been expressed in various ways. Women writers, especially, have been drawn to the idea of bisexuality since it appears to offer a larger space for creative freedom than the constraints of ‘femininity’ which women artists have often been

expected to adhere to, and represent. We find, for instance, in Virginia Woolf's work *A Room of One's Own*, a deep musing about this question in relation to the creative life of the writer. More recently, French feminist writers like Hélène Cixous, have delved into the notion of bisexuality as an inherent capacity of writers, especially women writers, to explore their plural sexualities at the level of writing. Excerpts from the works of these two writers are provided below:

Virginia Woolf

Excerpt from *A Room of One's Own*

“The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her... Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, ... (Woolf, 1929, p.102)

It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. ...

Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace.” (Woolf, 1929, p.108)

You have previously read about the works of Hélène Cixous in the context of psychoanalysis, *écriture féminine* and the notion of writing the body. Cixous invites women to write themselves out of the limitations of a stereotypical femininity, imposed by patriarchal norms. In one of her earlier works, *La Jeune Née (The Newly Born Woman)*, she opens up a discussion on the notion of bisexuality at the level of the psyche. Convinced that both women and men are capable of feminine and masculine attributes, Cixous, like Woolf, explores the possibility of accessing both sides of the psyche in order to liberate aesthetic creative impulses. Cixous believes that, due to historical and cultural conditioning, men learn to suppress their feminine side much more rigorously than women repress their masculine side. As a result, women end up being much more capable of being more fully ‘bisexual’. Cixous also distinguishes between two kinds of bisexuality - one that merely conjoins the male and the female, and conceals sexual difference, as represented in the ancient Greek myths, and the other, which is a recognition and acceptance of sexual difference within the individual. It is this latter bisexuality that she encourages women writers to explore, in order to explode the myths of a repressive and pre-determined

feminine. The excerpt below is taken from Hélène Cixous' well-known essay "Sorties" which appeared in *The Newly Born Woman*:

Helen Cixous: Excerpts from "Sorties"

"*She is bisexual:*

What I propose here leads directly to a reconsideration of bisexuality. To reassert the value of bisexuality; hence to snatch it from the fate classically reserved for it in which it is conceptualized as 'neuter' because, as such, it would aim at warding off castration. Therefore, I shall distinguish between two bisexualities,...

- 1) Bisexuality as a fantasy of a complete being, which replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference...
- 2) To this bisexuality that melts together and effaces, wishing to avert castration, I oppose the *other bisexuality*, the one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogentric Theater, sets up his or her erotic universe. Bisexuality, that is to say, the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes,...

For historical reasons, at the present time it is woman who benefits from and opens up within this bisexuality beside itself, which does not annihilate differences but cheers them on, pursues them, adds more: in a certain way, *woman is bisexual* - man having been trained to aim for glorious phallic monosexuality.

...

I will say: today, writing is woman's. That is not a provocation, it means that woman admits there is an other. In her becoming-woman, she has not erased the bisexuality latent in the girl as in the boy. Femininity and bisexuality go together, in a combination that varies according to the individual,... It is much harder for man to let the other come through him."

(Cixous, 1986, p. 84-85)

Besides such representations and analysis in myths, psychoanalysis and literature, androgyny has also been the subject of serious scientific scrutiny and investigation. In part B, we will briefly discuss the notion of the biomedical vis-à-vis social construction of the androgynous body with the help of case studies.

PART B: Biomedical Construction and the Androgynous Body

Only recently, understanding of the body has emerged as a specific field within sociology and gender studies (Turner, 1984, cited in Holmes, 2007). To many feminist scholars, the concept of the body plays a significant role

in seeing how gender is lived through different kinds of bodies. Hence, the discussion on androgynous body attracts critical analysis and multiple interpretations in understanding the gender socialization process. The two-sex biomedical model that emerged during the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century has increasingly looked at the body through the principle of binary opposites. This approach not only describes the body as a machine but also started to differentiate between the normal vis a vis abnormal body. This biomedical approach expanded the idea that the body can be seen as a tool to define femininity, masculinity, and other gendered identities in the society. For instance, the infant possessing either a penis or a vagina became the fundamental indicator for sexual difference. To quote **Mary Holmes**, “what you can see on the outside does not always match up with the other indicators of sex and there is a lot more biological variation than the simple categories ‘male’ or ‘female’ describe” (2007, p. 22). To understand the gender socialization process behind the androgynous body, it is important to discuss/examine the scientific construction of sex.

There are several research studies which show the inter-linkages between the androgynous body, homosexuality, and biology. However, these linkages have been interpreted differently. According to Hird (2004), the scientific discoveries about sex sometimes were sometimes influenced by specific socio-cultural assumptions held by the scientists. The androgynous body is an amalgamation of both female and male sex characteristics, which shows that some individuals may have a genetic sex which is opposite to their hormonal sex. For instance, a child might be genetically female (having two X chromosomes and no Y chromosome) but having male anatomy. Studies have shown that about 1 in 2000 babies and 17 in 1000 infants are born in the category of intersex (Fausto-Sterling, 2000b, Hird, 2004, cited in Holmes). This scientific construction of the category of intersex does not disqualify this body from being considered in the biologically determined natural category. It is just that society is institutionalized to view sexual difference either in female or male form, therefore a sense of ambiguity is attached to individuals who possess a combination of male and female characteristics. Since, bodies are seen as fundamentals in forming someone’s gender identities, in the case of the androgynous body, the gender identities and socializations are far more complex. Any person who does not fit into the fixed category of female or male is more or less considered as ‘wrong turning’. In bio-medical terms, these persons are perceived to be having ‘sexual abnormalities’ which can be cured with medical intervention (Holmes, 2007, p. 26). Holmes cites the experience of Melissa who was born with intersex condition.

Melissa was born with XX chromosomes as female and having a womb and an ovary. However, she was having ambiguous genitalia as either an enlarged clitoris or a small penis. She was ignorant about her condition, but was aware that something was wrong. Her mother had cautioned her to keep it secret and only doctors were permitted to touch her. Individuals born with this condition of intersex often come under some form of bio-medical surveillance as a curative strategy to correct their bodies. Melissa and others like her are subjected to medical surgery to acquire the gender identities within the so called 'appropriate' and 'fixed categories'.

In cases such as the above, often, the individual is unaware about her/his situation about sex change operation and the associated risks. The medical community has the firm belief that such individuals may encounter social and cultural complications if their sexual ambiguities are not corrected or normalized. Therefore, as soon as a baby is born with ambiguous sexual identity, the doctors become concerned about labeling the newborn with a clear sexual identity (Toomey, 2001, p. 40, cited in Holmes, p. 26). Hence, it can be described that the androgynous body is often viewed as abnormal, and an unclear body, for which a sexual identification is imposed upon the individual. The category of sex itself is socially constructed because giving an appropriate sexual identity to an androgynous body is determined by a community of people or the society. Hence, sex is always imposed upon the person and the process of imposition is not carried out in isolation of society.

In a similar way, in France, materialist feminists during the latter part of the twentieth century critiqued the naturalistic approach of accepting the sexual difference between female and male as natural and innate. They denied the understanding of 'women' or 'men' without relating it to the social context. Thus, we can see that the medical explanation of sexual difference is not free from social interpretation.

Social Construction of Gender: Case of Agnes

Grafinkel's case study about Agnes, a transgendered boy who adopted a female identity in his later life is a classic example, which offers an understanding about the social construction of gender. West and Zimmerman (2002) analysed the case of Agnes in the context of doing gender. They argued that gender is a learned behaviour and individuals acquire appropriate physical behaviour through interaction. Let us look at the case of Agnes.

Agnes thought of herself as a female with a male genital, which a woman doesn't possess. She adopted the female identity at the age of seventeen after carrying out a sex reassignment operation. She had learnt practical strategies both prior and after her surgery to display appropriate behaviour as per her physical body. According to West and Zimmerman (2002), "she had the practical task of managing the facts that she possessed male genitalia and that she lacked the social resources a girl's biography would presumably provide in everyday interaction" (p.43). She had to plan her behaviour within a particular social situation which complied with her new identity as a female.

As we can see from the above case, an individual's genitalia is hidden from public scrutiny. It is only everyday interaction and behaviour that confirms an individual's sex categorization. According to Garfinkel, Kessler and McKenna, categories of female and male are cultural in nature and result of the gender attribution process (cited in West and Zimmerman, 2002). The Agnes case shows that the world follows a two-sexed model and any individual's placement into such fixed categories of female or male is socially expected and enforced. Therefore, the experiences of a person possessing an androgynous identity are more complex and varied as they often encounter stereotypes/biases about the notion of an appropriate body.

CONCLUSION

While the examples and analyses that you have read above are scattered across time periods and areas of study, it would be evident by now that the concept of androgyny has fascinated the human mind over the ages. The multiple perspectives which have been used to understand, represent and examine androgyny, both at the physical and the mental levels, reveal the cultural significance and social imagination of androgyny in the societies all over the world.

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