



Mapping the Transgender Body in Conflict: A Case Study of The Yellow Sparrow: Memoir of a Transgender by Santa Khurai

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Page No. 28-32

Abstract: *This paper attempts to explore how a transgender woman's body is presented as a site of conflict in Santa Khurai's memoir "The Yellow Sparrow". For a transgender person, spatial engagement can alternate between realms of peril and prospects of safety. On the one side, Khurai is faced with conflict over her gender identity and on the other side, the political and ethnic conflict that is devouring Manipur. The paper studies how power, movement, and memory dynamics can interplay in shaping her identity and lived experiences, revealing how these forces can determine how she navigates internal and external conflicts. It also reviews the existing research on the plight of transgender people in conflict zones and examines its psychological effects on them, and contributes to further research on the challenges faced by the transgender community in areas of ethnic conflict and political unrest. The paper utilises textual analysis of the memoir using qualitative methodology and close reading while focusing on the author's experiences and her 'routine of humiliation' and exercising contextual analysis of the memoir while focusing on Manipur's political and ethnic history. The study uses the theoretical framework of gender theory, queer theory, trauma, memory, stigma and its intersectional interactions with the motifs of conflict, power and movement to examine how a transgender woman's body is targeted and controlled by both the state and non-state actors in Manipur.*

Ultimately, the paper also seeks to contribute to further enhance scholarly discourse around narratives of transgender people living in conflict zones, weighing on their unique vulnerabilities and resilience in navigating daily life under ruthless power structures that suppress them. In addition, it underscores the significance of bodies like the All Manipur Nupi Maanbi Association (AMaNA) and SAATHII in catering to the needs of transgenders as well as eradicating the cultural stigma around them.

Keywords- *Transgender, queer, conflict, memoir, trauma*

Santa Khurai's memoir, *The Yellow Sparrow*, offers a deeply personal and powerful narrative that sheds light on transgender communities' lived experiences, especially in a zone of conflict. In India, where cultural diversity can coexist with institutional discrimination, experiences like these have a significant influence in amplifying voices that challenge the societal hypocrisy, prejudices and stigma. In telling her poignant story, Khurai beautifully weaves her autobiographical narrative of self-exploration with much broader narratives of



transgender persecution, showing how the bodies of transgender women can become sites of contention in all manner of struggles, be they social, political, or personal.

With unyielding gender binaries continuing to dictate societal norms and expectations, *The Yellow Sparrow* reflects upon the mockery, humiliation, and violence meted out to transgender individuals on a wider scale. In this respect, Khurai's memoir can be read as both a testimony and as a critique of such systemic marginalisation, which has been imposed upon her community. She vividly shares the daily agonies of being a transgender woman within a patriarchal and heteronormative culture, with the understanding that discrimination is not only a social reality but sanctioned through institutional policies made by prejudiced officials.

Born a male, Khurai, at the age of 17, started to dress as a woman and claim her female identity. It certainly wasn't an easy journey, but accepting that she was right in her own way gave her the confidence to strive forward. Set in Manipur, a troubled and war-torn region, Khurai's experiences portray the multi-layered vulnerabilities that confront transgender persons in their constant battle against gender discrimination within an equally troubling socio-political landscape. More importantly, the interplay between gender identity and such ethnic conflicts, insurgency, and militarisation adds another layer of complexity to Khurai's narrative, thereby making it an indispensable literary account.

Lack of Research

The existing research has been mostly successful in examining the lives of trans-people in ethnic and political unrest zones, especially on systemic violence and social stigma and the lack of safe spaces available to them. However, not much research has been done regarding the Indian context. Therefore, Khurai's *Yellow Sparrow* gives a unique perspective to the discourse of the struggle between transgender identity and ethnic violence specific to Manipur. Khurai's memoir speaks about the challenges the Nupi Nambi (Transgender) people face while handling both the internal struggles of accepting their own self-identity and the external stress of violence, stigma and marginalisation. Khurai, in her own book *Pheida: Gender at Periphery*, had stated that gender in the indigenous society of Manipur has never been binary. So, discrimination against trans people in Manipuri society is something that happened recently.

The research paper tries to utilise detailed textual analysis of the memoir using qualitative methodology and close reading while focusing on the author's experiences and her "routine of humiliation" (Khurai, 2023). It also employs contextual analysis of the memoir while focusing on Manipur's political and ethnic history. The study has used the theoretical framework of gender theory, queer theory, trauma, memory, stigma and its intersectional interactions with the motifs of conflict, power and movement to examine how a transgender woman's body is targeted and controlled by both the state and non-state actors in Manipur.

Body as a warzone

Here, the transgender woman's body is portrayed as a war zone where outer ethnic violence intersects with inner battles over her gender identity. In Manipur, where ethnic conflict and military intervention had been ongoing for several decades under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, transgender individuals have been faced with compounded vulnerabilities through systemic oppression. Khurai narrates how she was traumatically beaten up by security forces multiple times, and how her community was even targeted at night. In this climate, transgender people are fighting not just for their identity against gender-based discrimination but also against the instability of militarised governance and ethnic strife.



The intersection of gender identity with these broader conflicts adds yet another layer of complexity to Khurai's story, as her memoir becomes a key text to bring together the conjoined realities of gender and regional politics. It is this contradiction that shows that personal and political struggles are fundamentally intertwined, resulting in her memoir being an important document in Manipur's history. Power and movement are important identity markers here, as both the physical moves made by the subject within a conflict zone and emotional navigation through trauma are circumscribed and subdued by oppressive structures. In the epilogue, Khurai writes about the ethnic conflict that erupted in Manipur in 2023 and its aftermath, where she states that the idea of home has been destroyed. Despite all these challenges, Khurai's resistance and reclamation of identity are thus all the more resilient in light of the marginalising forces.

According to Khurai, "To claim my identity was to fight for my right to exist in a society that wished me invisible." (Khurai, 2023, p.26) In Manipur, transgender people (male to female) are referred to as "nupi maanbi," a historically derogatory term. While "nupi" in Manipuri means a female person, "maanbi" means a person who resembles. Central to this memoir is a struggle to rework this identity in a framework that is exclusionary, invoking a continuous struggle over self-worth and identity. She explains how her path had been riddled with constant challenges, from struggling to find employment due to discrimination to her battle with drug abuse.

A large part of the marginalised population, within which transgender communities belong, experiences violence, exclusion, and erasure on a daily basis. Weaving the personal experience into the historical and political realities, Khurai's memoir becomes a strong call to action, asking readers to understand the plight of marginalised communities and to work towards change, even in the face of obstacles. It is more than a portrayal of suffering, as *The Yellow Sparrow* represents resilience and agency in the face of adversity, influenced by her life's bouquet of experiences. Khurai honours the valour and courage displayed by trans individuals who keep claiming their identities in the face of systemic oppression. Her memoir remains an empowering call for recognition, equality, and justice of all humans, urging all of society to revisit its notions on gender and realise the dignity that exists within all individuals.

The Yellow Sparrow elevates the voices of innumerable others who have been muffled, mirroring the ongoing struggle for transgender rights in India. The memoir transcends the realm of personal memoir, emerging as an important socio-political text that urges its readers to confront the status quo and consider deeper conversations about gender, identity, and belonging.

Intersectionality

The memoir delves into the intersectionality of gender, race, memory and movement while showing how these facets collectively shape Khurai's experiences in the increasingly volatile society. *The yellow sparrow* successfully serves as an instrument for resilience through the act of writing the memories that brought the author "*relief and bliss*" (Khurai, 2023, p.x). She skillfully narrates the bureaucratic hurdles that she had to jump through to obtain her passport as a woman, which required her to get a sex reassignment surgery certificate. The author recounts the utter humiliation she felt when the lady officer at the passport office asked, "*Why do you have shaving marks on your face?*" (Khurai, 2023, p.271) Her racial identity or her "Yellowness" was also a reason for conflict and, shame for the author when she moved to mainland India. This meant that a trans woman from the northeast was constantly reminded of



her body, racial and gender identity at every point of her life, even in queer and trans safe spaces.

The memoir also explores the relationships, love and hardships as Khurai seeks acceptance as a transgender woman. It also points out how the traditionally safe spaces like homes, end up becoming sites of violence and conflict. Her life through spaces of violence and safety underlines the risky existence of transgender people in areas of conflict.

Trans body

*You are different from the other sparrows,
Your innocent body is spewing a host of
Yellow feathers, incessantly, alarmingly
Your yellow feathers are spreading
All over your body till the corner of your eyes.
I have lost the courage to pluck your feathers anymore.
Unlike any other sparrow, you are born with yellow feathers
My worries have come to nothing
They will ostracise you from the rest of the flock,
You will live friendless and lonely for the rest of your life.* (Khurai, 2023, p.3)

Space for a transgender person is either a site of danger or a potential refuge. Most people find safety in their own homes, with Khurai fighting her battles in the home itself. With her father's physical abuses and ultimate disownment, Khurai slid into a life where family rejection was just the beginning of wider violence. Her marriage brought yet another round of mental abuse, and domestic violence at the hands of her husband. Thus, the house, usually recognised as a source of protection, turned into a battlefield where she had to fight harder than anyone for the right to live on her own terms.

The trauma Khurai faced wasn't an isolated occurrence, but an echo of the entrenched stereotypes which impede the acceptance of transgender people in society. Family rejection and a lack of acceptance from society often lead many transgender people to live in a constant battle for their existence, and, mere existence becomes an act of resistance. The humiliation and physical attacks she was subjected to were not enough to dissuade her. In her own words, *"I wanted so much to be a woman, to be beautiful and fashionable, that I was unafraid of taking on anything that challenged my conviction...I could bear anything, but there was no way I could live my life as a man."* (Khurai, p.54). The cruelty of reality encourages the courage with which Khurai defies systemic oppression. The reclamation of one's narrative and agency signifies the willingness to clash with the very societal norms that would shackle her into nothingness.

Conclusion

The memoir stresses Khurai's dedication to advocating for trans rights and activism. She states, *"I live to fight another day,"* (Khurai, 2023, p.294), reinforcing her commitment to fighting for the cause. The memoir highlights the importance of further exploring the narratives of transgender people living in conflict zones, highlighting their unique vulnerabilities and strengths for navigating daily life under abusive power structures, like AFSPA. She states that there is a need for a fundamental shift in societal attitudes towards transgender people. She also underscores the significance of bodies like the All Manipur Nupi Maanbi Association (AMaNA) and SAATHII in catering to the needs of a transgender individual as well as eradicating the cultural stigma against them.



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