



Tiresias in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: Exploring Transgender Representation in the Modern Context

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the representation of transgender identity through the character of Tiresias in Thomas Stearns Eliot's 'The Waste Land,' a landmark modern poem that explores life in London in the aftermath of World War I. Tiresias is the character appearing in 'The Fire Sermon' section of the poem who transverses both male and female genders thereby emerging as an embodiment of gender fluidity. This research portrays Tiresias as transgender to discuss transgender representation in the modern context. For this, the study draws upon mythological allusions, literary analysis, queer theory, artistic expressions, and legal initiatives across the world. The research aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the transgender experiences including the struggles and challenges faced by them in the contemporary world to foster empathy. The findings of this study signal the beginning of the Trans era that holds promising possibilities for the future of transindividuals.

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Introduction

‘Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatsoever to alter their identity.’ (Woolf 1928)

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), the 1948 Nobel Prize in Literature recipient was a character of great intellect and reflection. He is perhaps best known for the famous poem *The Waste Land*, published in 1922. The poem is often considered as an epitome of modern poetry. It showcases Eliot's innovative approach to poetry combined with his signature blend of modern style, classical allusions, complex exploration of themes, and his ability to capture the fragmented spirit of the post-World War I era. It is set in the wake of World War I in a period of turmoil, destruction, and social disorder that typified the early twentieth century. 'The Fire Sermon' is the third section of *The Waste Land*. Within the complex tapestry of voices, references, and perspectives in this third section, one character emerges as an intriguing figure: Tiresias. Tiresias, the mythological figure appears as a sightless and detached observer in the poem. As a spectator, he has a major impact on the debate on gender identity. This study portrays Tiresias as transgender to raise interrogations about the traditional norms of gender and sexuality. To his gender-fluidity, he symbolizes the sensibilities of both sexes. The background of this research lies in the expanding awareness of transgender representation in literature and various forms of media. The journey of transgenders is marked with self-discovery and self-acceptance. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the experiences of the untiring, courageous, and resilient transgender community. In recent years, discussions surrounding transgenders have gained massive attention in society. So, it becomes important to investigate the contributions of literary works written decades ago to these ongoing conversations. Drawing parallels from cultural allusions, and mythologies and exploring present-day comparisons, the study strives for transgender empowerment in the contemporary world.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are

- To critically analyze the character of Tiresias and its significance as a symbol of gender-fluidity.
- To comprehend the importance and contribution of Queer theory in the literary representation of transgender identity.
- To assess transgender representation in the modern context by exploring various forms of media including cinema and artworks.

- To exemplify legal initiatives taken worldwide in identifying the areas where improvement is achieved and propose measures for more respectful transgender inclusion.

Literature Review

Literature has provided a platform for transgender representation. It has gained noteworthy attention from scholars and readers for the understanding and acceptance of diverse gender identities. *The Waste Land* embraces the character of Tiresias signifying gender-fluidity. It provides the symbolism of Tiresias as a subtle figure who challenges traditional binary categorizations. The literary works of Queer theorists such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and so on showcase the themes of the social construction of gender and performativity which are helpful in forming the new definition of Gender.

Modern literature has also proven to be an effective way for the authentic portrayal of the third gender. Recognition of diverse identities and Intersectionality are the important factors in reshaping the experiences of transgenders in the modern literature. Novels like 'Middlesex' (2002) by Geoffrey Eugenides, Imogen Binnie's 'Nevada' (2013), Janet Mock's 'Redefining Realness' (2014), and Leslie Feinberg's 'Stone Butch Blues' (1993) delve into the emotional landscapes of transgenders unveiling the internal conflicts, societal biases, and quests for self-discovery defining their journeys. These works of literature reflect the aspects of gender diversity which inspires readers to consider the complex nature of human experiences.

Methodology

This section outlines the methods used to conduct this qualitative research.

1. **Literary Analysis:** The primary method used is the close study of T. S. Eliot's, *The Waste Land* which involves a careful analysis of the text with a specific focus on the portrayal of Tiresias.
2. **Mythological Studies:** This research uses interpretations of Tiresias from Greek mythology and instances of transgender representation from Hindu mythology.
3. **Queer Theory:** This theoretical perspective provides insights into the exploration of non-binary identities in literature.
4. **Comparative analysis and artistic expressions:** This involves comparative

analysis of other literary, cinematic, art, and legal frameworks to establish connections and developments in the portrayal of transgender identities.

5. Secondary Sources: This includes an extensive analysis of relevant academic sources including scholarly research papers and articles which provide additional insights to support the research.

Analysis

The research is categorized into three sections – Mythology, Queer theory, and the Modern context.

Mythological Allusions: Exploring Transgender Narratives

Throughout the records, allusion has served as a creative patchwork of various historical, cultural, and mythological pieces into narratives. The poem depicts the transformation of the character of Tiresias reinforced by textual evidence from the poem itself. Burning as a motif here signifies transformation.

The poem states,
To Carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest burning.’ (Lines 306-310)

Eliot masterly uses allusion to employ the history of Tiresias who experienced both male and female lives. This serves as an authentication of him as a transgender figure. This figure is not confined to *The Waste Land* only. In ‘Oedipus Rex’ by Sophocles, Tiresias is a blind prophet who predicts the fate of King Oedipus. This character was inspired by Greek mythology, Tiresias a blind seer of Apollo in Thebes famous for his foresight and for being transformed into a woman for seven years. Tiresias transforms from a man to a woman after coming across the two mating snakes and striking them with a stick. He later got back to his original form. This narrative illustrates the openness of Greeks to gender transformations. Moreover, the concept of gender fluidity is a recurring theme in Hindu epics. According to Hindu mythology, gender change could occur through magic, character-based gender transition, or reincarnation. The Hindu epic the ‘Mahabharata’ features Shikhandi who was assigned female at birth and was later recognized as male. He then emerges as a war hero, eventually dying on

the battlefield. Hindu gods like Ardhanarishwar (the half Shiva and half Parvati form of Mahadeva) and Vishnu (reincarnating as Krishna who also transforms into Mohini) embody both genders. Krishna's marriage to Aarvan as Mohini, followed by Aarvan's death and Mohini's mourning is commemorated annually in the Koovagam village's eighteen-day festival by the transgender community. These mythological allusions enable us to reimagine gender as a spectrum of diverse identities.

Tiresias and the Emergence of Queer Theory

“ I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts.” (Lines 218-219)

In the above-mentioned extract, the speaker Tiresias brings in a complex and mysterious depiction of gender identity. The term ‘Old man’ refers to his male specification while ‘wrinkled female breasts’ marks his female attributes juxtaposing the traditional gender roles and expectations. This symbolism reverberates with the core ideas of Queer Theory. The portrayal can be supposed as an early exploration of concepts that later became chief components of queer theory. In this way, the inclusion of Tiresias in the poem can be considered a harbinger of the emergence of Queer Theory.

The arrival of Queer Theory during the late twentieth century in literature was propelled by the assertion to challenge and change the prevailing assumptions about gender and sexuality within literary analysis. Traditional literary criticism often acted in accordance with heteronormative and cisnormative outlooks which restricted the exploration of characters, narratives, and themes to conventional gender roles. This led to the marginalization of LGBTQ+ voices. The advent of Queer Theory was crucial to bridge this gap by recognising diverse identities. Through a multidimensional aspect, it activated literary scholars to analyze texts from a new perspective by opening up avenues to explore non-normativity in characters and subtextual queer narratives in literature. Judith Butler in her book ‘Gender Trouble’ (1990) introduced the concept of gender performativity questioning the stability of gender identities. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her work ‘Epistemology Of The Closet’ (1990) explored issues of shame and secrecy of non- heteronormative identities.

Queer Theory gave impetus to change by challenging the long-existing normativity. Facilitating the creation of a space free from prejudices for individuals to handle their

identities, has contributed to a shift from a narrow-minded perspective to a broad perspective in society to become receptive to acknowledging and celebrating these diverse gender identities.

Transgender Representation in the Modern Context

In a landmark judgment that reverberated across India and beyond, the legal recognition of transgenders as the 'third gender' was solidified by the National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India verdict on 15 April 2014.

(Case Number: 400 of 2012 Bench: K. S. Radhakrishnan and A. K. Sikri)

This remarkable move marked a major turning point in the recognition of the third-gender community's existence.

Although the transgender community has slightly progressed in terms of visibility and public acceptability, there are still enormous obstacles to overcome. Discrimination in accommodations, work, and healthcare based on gender identification; homelessness as a result of assault and housing restrictions; violence including sexual assault and even murder eventually contributing to their mental health issues, limited access to gender-affirming care like hormone therapy due to financial constraints and so on. Their personal struggles include rejection by families and friends, social isolation, and complications in the search for romantic partners. Regardless of this, the transgender community has shown immense determination to fight for their rights.

In terms of artistic expression, transgender experiences have found a strong voice. Cinema is an important source for showcasing transgender reality and overcoming stereotypes. Examples are *Tiresia* (2003), *Gulabi Aaina* (2003), *Common Gender* (2012), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *A Fantastic Woman* (2017) and *Taali* (2023). These cinematic instances provide real-life glimpses into the lives of transgenders showcasing their tenacity and hardships. In the world of visual arts, from the temples of Khajuraho and Mughal carvings depicting homosexual sex to modern-day. Aravani Art Project aims to embrace people from LGBTQIA+ communities. Kalki Subramaniam, a transgender artist and activist who showcased her work (see figure 1) in the exhibition hosted by Sahodari Foundation (Tamil Nadu) provides support and counseling for Trans women.



Fig. 1 Trans Art, 2021

Well-known figures from the transgender community have come out as role models fighting for acceptance and recognition. Notable personalities are Laxmi Narayan Tripathi from India and Rozina Akter Ratna from Bangladesh. Transgender rights have gained massive attention across the world which has led to a wide range of initiatives in various countries such as Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019 in India to necessitate access to healthcare services and the Gender Identity Law in 2012 in Argentina to allow individuals to legally change their gender identity. Gender confirmation surgeries and healthcare services for transgenders in Thailand and Bangladesh. Incorporation of transgender-friendly curricula in educational institutions in India and Scotland. Community support networks like India's 'Hijra community' and Bangladesh's 'Hijra Sangh' help in enhancing transgender stability. The emergence of India's Transgender Persons Awareness Week and Bangladesh's Hijra Pride Parade for the celebration of transgender identities carrying banners with messages such as 'Hijras are human beings too' and 'We deserve respect.' All these initiatives are a good sign of change and progress. However, hurdles still exist. Laws must protect rights, education must battle prejudices, healthcare must help, and workplaces must be equal if we want to have a better future for them. Society needs to take historical lessons to respect and embrace the diversity of transgender life.

Discussion

The implications of this research paper are perceptive about the under represented experiences of transgenders in the modern context. Through gender-fluid Tiresias, this study challenges traditional binary understandings of gender. The exploration of transgender representation from ancient mythology to late twentieth-century Queer Theory to modern context demonstrates the shift from marginalization to recognition and fosters active participation and more inclusion of them in various professions. However, the limitations of the study are twofold. Firstly, the concept of transgender identity did not exist during the time Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*. Therefore, it is important to interpret the text with caution recognising that Eliot might not had the intention to portray Tiresias as transgender. Secondly, historical works may have been written down with different perspectives which may not align with modern perspectives about transgenders. The research in the future should aim to take historical context with the author's intentions and impacts, analyze other transgender literary characters, and examine its impact on contemporary readers.

Conclusion

Through this research paper, we explored how Tiresias, a mere spectator in Eliot's poem, symbolizes a complex blend of genders. Tiresias' dual nature, 'old man' with 'wrinkled female breasts' symbolizes gender-fluidity. The portrayal of transgender in literature is not a new concept. Since time immemorial ancient tales of Shikhandi in the Hindu epic 'Mahabharata' to Greek mythology 'Tiresias' have resonated the essence of gender fluidity. Mythological and literary allusions encourage us to look into the timeless challenges faced by transgenders to embrace gender diversity. These transgender narratives paved the way for the emergence of Queer Theory in the late twentieth century. This theory expands the idea of gender fluidity. It has opened up avenues for expressing diverse gender identities contributing to the realistic representation of them in literature. Tiresias serves as the precursor to Queer Theory in reshaping gender identity and sexuality. This comprehensive study discusses transgender recognition drawing from literature, artistic expressions, and legal landmarks. Through all these expressions, this study glimpses into the authentic existence and shared struggles of transgender individuals.

Transgender individuals have come so far in fighting for themselves but still, there is a long way to go. In the future, it is likely that trans representation will continue to increase in various professions. In the education field, we wish to see transgenders as educators. In government institutions, we wish to see them holding positions of power and contributing to policy-making. In media and entertainment, we can expect to see more gender-diverse characters portrayed on screen with more authenticity. We hope for the empowerment of the transgender community to pursue their passions freely. It is where they will be able to live their authentic selves not defined by the expectations of others. The future belongs to them because transness is about living out new possibilities.

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