

A Queer Theoretical Analysis of Identity and Selfhood: The Character of Malli in Ram C/O Anandhi

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Abstract

Through the character of Malli in Ram C/O Anandhi, this paper offers a queer theoretical examination of identity and selfhood. It examines how Malli's identity as a transwoman is malleable and influenced by both lived experiences and societal conventions. Drawing on the concept of gender performativity by Judith Butler, the study explores how identity is formed through repeated actions and social interactions rather than biology. Through close textual analysis, it shows how Malli negotiates her selfhood within a heteronormative society that enforces rigid gender roles. Her experiences challenge binary ideas of gender and highlight identity as performative and evolving. The paper ultimately presents Malli as an active agent who constructs her own identity beyond socially imposed limits.

Keyword: Queer Theory; Gender Performativity; Identity Construction; Selfhood; Heteronormativity; Transgender Representation;

1. Introduction

In recent years, literature has increasingly engaged with diverse gender identities that were once marginalized or overlooked. Such representations are significant as they bring visibility to voices that have historically been silenced. Akhil P. Dharmajan's Ram C/O Anandhi presents one such narrative through the character of Malli, a transwoman whose life reflects both social marginalization and personal assertion. Her experiences reveal that identity is shaped not only by individual consciousness but also by social expectations and cultural norms.

Queer studies, as a critical framework, challenges the assumption that gender and sexuality are fixed or natural. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, argues that gender is culturally constructed and performed through repeated acts rather than determined by biology (Butler 9). Butler further notes that "if sex and gender are radically distinct... 'woman' need not be the cultural construction of the female body" (Butler 142). Complementing this, Michel Foucault explains that power operates through everyday social relations, asserting that "power is exercised from innumerable points" and functions productively in shaping identities (Foucault 94).

The novel places Malli in a society ruled by heteronormative beliefs—a concept articulated by Michael Warner—which privilege heterosexuality and enforce rigid gender binaries. In this context, Malli's identity emerges through ongoing negotiation, resistance, and self-articulation.

This paper contends that Malli's identity and selfhood are not fixed but are actively constructed through performance, social engagement, and resistance to conventional structure. By employing a queer

theoretical lens, the study reads Malli not as a passive victim, but rather as an active subject who shapes her identity within a restrictive social order.

2. Constructing Identity: From Kalidas to Malli

Malli's character in *Ram C/O Anandhi* is portrayed as fluid and evolving, influenced by personal struggle, social interaction, and lived experiences. Her shift from Kalidas to Malli represents not just a name change, but a deeper process of self-discovery and identity formation. This shift indicates that gender identity is a complex matter that is continuously negotiated rather than biologically predetermined.

This idea is explicitly reflected in the novel when Ram states, "Kalidas is dead; now it is Malli who lives" (108). While this statement appears to affirm Malli's chosen identity, it also reveals how recognition is mediated through external validation. Malli's existence as Malli becomes meaningful only when acknowledged within the dominant social framework, suggesting that identity is not entirely self-contained but shaped through interaction with others.

From a queer theoretical viewpoint, this resonates with Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, which proposes that gender is constituted through repeated actions and expressions. Malli's identity is shaped by such performative processes, where her lived experiences and self-expression contribute to the construction of her gendered self. However, these performances are not completely free; they take place within a society that imposes rigid norms and expectations.

This perspective resonates with the earlier insights of Simone de Beauvoir, who famously stated, "One is not born a woman but becomes one" (*The Second Sex* 283), highlighting the role of social conditioning in the formation of identity. Extending this argument, Butler's later work, *Bodies That Matter*, further examines how cultural norms regulate and shape the ways in which bodies and identities are understood within society.

Simultaneously, the change from Kalidas to Malli is characterized by trauma, displacement, and emotional struggle. Malli's narration of her past reveals the violence and rejection she faces, including familial abandonment and social exploitation. These experiences are not isolated but are deeply embedded in the broader social structure that marginalizes non-normative identities. Her journey, therefore, reflects both personal resilience and the constraints imposed by society.

Rather than presenting identity as a linear progression, the novel portrays it as a layered and ongoing process. Malli's past as Kalidas continues to haunt her present, indicating that identity is not simply erased and rewritten, but constantly negotiated across time. This complexity challenges binary understandings of gender and highlights the fluid nature of selfhood.

3. Heteronormativity and Social Regulation

The society shown in *Ram C/O Anandhi* imposes strict norms that control gender and sexuality, establishing a framework in which only heterosexual identities are acknowledged as natural and legitimate. This system operates through what Michael Warner describes as heteronormativity—a structure that privileges heterosexuality while marginalizing identities that do not conform to its expectations. Within this framework, individuals like Malli are positioned as 'other,' constantly subjected to exclusion, surveillance, and control.

Malli's existence vividly illustrates the workings of this heteronormative system. Her identity is not merely questioned but actively suppressed through social institutions including family, community, and workplace. The refusal of education, emotional abandonment, and the violence she endures reveal how

deeply ingrained these norms are in everyday life. As Reshmi and Anilkumar observe, “Transgenders have been here in the society for centuries. But they have not given a deserving position or acknowledgement. On the other hand, they are being exploited by the so called ‘civilized society’... they become the untouchables, uncivilized and humiliated community” (qtd. in K. S. and Jose 1215). This observation reflects the long-standing marginalization that shapes Malli’s lived reality. Her account of physical and sexual violence— “If they take me away, I won’t even be able to walk for three or four days afterward. My body will be covered with belt marks and burns...”—demonstrates the harsh methods by which non-normative identities are regulated and managed. These experiences illustrate not just personal pain but also the wider societal frameworks that validate exclusion and mistreat.

This marginalization is not limited to individual experiences but reflects a broader social reality. Studies indicate that transgender individuals in Kerala face severe socio-economic challenges, including low income, limited access to stable employment, and widespread discrimination in both public and private spheres. A significant percentage experience harassment and violence, while many hesitate to report such incidents due to fear and social stigma (qtd. in K. S. and Jose 1215). These conditions reveal how deeply entrenched normative structures shape the lived realities of marginalized communities.

Heteronormativity also operates at the level of representation. Malli’s marginal position reflects a wider cultural tendency to render transgender identities invisible or secondary. Only certain identities are granted legitimacy and visibility, while others are excluded from recognition. This selective visibility reinforces the idea that deviation from normative gender roles must remain hidden or unacknowledged.

However, Malli’s existence within this restrictive framework is not entirely passive. Even as she is subjected to exclusion and control, her assertion of identity becomes a form of resistance. By choosing to live as Malli despite societal pressures, she challenges the very norms that seek to erase her. Her identity thus becomes a site of both marginalization and resistance, revealing the ongoing tension between social regulation and selfhood.

4. Selfhood, Agency, and Emotional Expression

Although Malli’s existence is influenced by exclusion and marginalization, the novel does not present her merely as a victim of social forces. Instead, she appears as a person who continually shapes her identity and reinforces her self-concept in a limiting setting. Her identity is conveyed not just via her gender identity but also through her emotional complexity, connections, and yearning for acknowledgment.

Malli’s interactions with Ram reveal her longing for acceptance and belonging. This is most poignantly expressed when she says, “Let me have a place beside your name, at least on this cement bench” (199). This moment reflects her desire to be acknowledged within a social framework that often denies her legitimacy. The request is simple, yet deeply symbolic—it signifies her need for emotional recognition and a space within human relationships that transcend rigid societal norms.

Her capacity for love and attachment challenges stereotypical representations of transgender individuals as existing outside conventional emotional frameworks. Malli’s feelings are sincere and profound, demonstrating that her identity cannot be reduced to marginalization alone. Instead, her emotional life becomes an important dimension through which her selfhood is constructed and expressed.

However, the instability of this recognition is revealed in the way others perceive her. Despite earlier affirming her identity, Ram later addresses her as “Kalidas” (200). This shift reflects the difficulty of fully accepting identities that challenge normative expectations. Malli’s selfhood, therefore, exists in a fragile

space where affirmation and denial coexist, highlighting the tension between self-perception and social recognition.

From a queer theoretical perspective, this tension underscores the idea that identity is not formed in isolation but through interaction with others. Malli's sense of self is shaped by both acceptance and rejection, making her identity a site of continuous negotiation. Yet, her persistence in expressing her identity and emotions reflects a form of agency that resists complete erasure.

Thus, Malli's character embodies a complex understanding of selfhood—one that is shaped by vulnerability, resilience, and the constant effort to assert one's existence within a society that often refuses to acknowledge it.

5. Conclusion

This study has analysed the character of Malli in *Ram C/O Anandhi* using a queer theoretical framework, emphasizing how identity is not static but continuously constructed through social and cultural processes. Drawing on Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, the paper demonstrates that Malli's identity develops via continual actions, interactions, and negotiations within a heteronormative society. Her experiences challenge rigid gender binaries and reveal identity as fluid, dynamic, and shaped by external forces as much as by internal comprehension.

At the same time, Malli's journey illustrates the growth of identity and agency within conditions of marginalization. Instead of being depicted as a helpless victim, she emerges as an individual who actively asserts her identity through resistance, self-expression, and emotional resilience. Her challenges with rejection, exclusion, and misunderstanding demonstrate the emotional depth of her character, while also emphasizing that identity formation involves both personal strength and social negotiation. In this regard, Malli represents a significant challenge to dominant narratives that silence or simplify transgender experiences.

Moreover, the wider social realities depicted in the novel, particularly within the south Indian context, emphasize the systemic inequalities faced by the transgender community. Issues such as discrimination, economic instability, and insufficient social acceptance continue to shape their lived experiences. By highlighting these realities into focus, *Ram C/O Anandhi* plays a crucial role in queer discourse, encouraging a rethinking of societal norms and fostering greater awareness and empathy. Ultimately, the novel affirms the need to recognize identity as diverse and evolving, moving beyond restrictive frameworks toward a more inclusive understanding of gender and selfhood.

6. References

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