

Transcending Gender Divisions: A Study of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*

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Abstract

The present paper takes into account the self-narrative of transgender writer Laxmi Narayan Tripathi from the perspective of physical identity and gender performativity. This paper attempts to investigate gender roles from the perspective of heteronomous gender culture. The world we live in now defines sexual orientation solely in terms of femininity and masculinity since the creation of the universe. Any deviation from this binary orientation is either rejected or regarded as deviant across cultural boundaries. Owing to their distinctive sexual identity, which is built through these gender roles, the third gender is given different gender roles as a result of 'exclusion'. People of the third gender are pervasive in all civilizations, even though society views them as deviant or a disgrace. They are treated as physiological blunders in India, where they receive therapy to help them change so they can become part of society. In these countries, heterosexuals have the authority to define the sexual identity of another gender. Understanding the fundamental characteristics of both the marginalised hijra people and the community is the purpose of the study. This investigation will demonstrate aspects like how hijras interpret the ideas of sex and gender to evaluate their position. The social structure of the hijra community will also be examined in this study.

Keywords: gender performativity, sexual orientation, marginalised, physiological, exclusion, heteronomous.

Introduction

The literary genre known as 'Hijra Literature' has emerged in India in recent times. According to the Britannica Encyclopaedia definition of the term transgender, "term self-applied by persons whose gender identity varies from that traditionally associated with their apparent biological sex at birth" (Tauches). One of the biggest kinds of exclusion for the hijra group, silence, is broken, and these subalterns' voices can now be heard through their brief memoirs. Although these writings are disorganised, they are still able to cause social ripples by expressing the resentment and dissatisfaction of hijras over their marginalised position in society.

Transcending Gender Divisions in *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*

The text chosen for this study *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* demonstrates how the third gender group wants to take control of their lives rather than being used and manipulated by others' knowledge and authority. To quote the remarks of A.Revathi from *A Life in Trans Activism* regarding the intention behind writing an autobiography:

Writing emerged as the most powerful tool to showcase the lives of the hijras with sensitivity and compassion. Whatever affects the hijra community, also affects me personally. It was impossible for me to look the other way or keep quiet. Writing was the most effective tool to deal with the oppression. I had to write frankly and fearlessly about our lives that are lived perilously close to the edge. (Revathi 78-79)

In order to educate the cisgender community about the subhuman conditions and suffering of the hijra clan, this study considers an open narrative authored by members of the third gender group. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, a book detailing the life experience of a transgender activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is translated from Marathi by Raja Rao and P.G. Joshi. The misconceptions and paradoxes surrounding the life of transgender people and their unfathomable existence could be answered by such self-narrative texts. A.Revathi's words can be used to support this finding, where she writes:

I see my role as a writer to be another dimension of my work as a human rights activist. Writing, for me, is a powerful way to connect the hijra community, my family and society. Through bridging the huge gap between these two worlds, I hope to initiate a dialogue; to make people see the interconnections; to underscore the fact that as humans we have to fulfil our sense of individual and collective responsibility. Writing, like any other art form, allows us to bridge yawning chasms. Art is a great unifier and leveller. It cements relationships. It holds the key to long-closed doors that have become rusty due to centuries of prejudice and ignorance. (Revathi 79-80)

The story of Vidya is one of the few examples of transgender people defying or avoiding the predetermined gender identity imposed by sociocultural constructs. The physical and mental transition of a transwoman is described in Vidya's autobiography, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. This first-hand narrative details Vidya's drastic transition from her socioculturally given male sex to her most favoured female sex. The sacrifices she makes in order to attain this stature in society are commendable:

People generally feel they are living in a good world – a world free from corruption, violence, betrayal, treachery, obscenity and greed. But how many slings and arrows of outrageous fortune has this world directed at me! These missiles have battered my heart to numbness. When I go out and beg- on the street, in trains, at shops- I consider it my revenge, my claim of compensation from each and every member of the prevailing society. (Vidya 93)

Unlike Revathi, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi belongs to the educated sect and has aspirations for her future. The childhood trauma that a gender variant individual faces have a longing impact on his/her life. Given the exploitation Laxmi Narayan experienced from society as a result of her sexuality, it is clear from her remarks that she did not have sufficient opportunity to relish her childhood. Laxmi says, "These sexual assaults transformed me. I

became secretive and incommunicative, hiding my feelings from my family and friends. Suddenly, it felt as if my childhood was over and I had grown up before my time” (Laxmi 7).

The heteronomous society that works on the system of binary gender never accepts the tribulations of a gender-variant person is pushed into. A person who has become a hijra is left with no other career option other than sex work and begging. Lack of employment is the major issue that transgenders face. Unable to find a decent mode of living, majority of them are compelled to indulge in begging:

Inside, I simmered with rage against a formless, nameless society. Begging in stores was no joke: bazaar begging meant walking miles everyday, stopping at shop after shop. Nobody gave you a red carpet welcome; the security staff at big shops refused to let you in, so you had to shout at them and make a racket; you had to clap till your hands stung even when you had long stopped clapping; only then did they give you any alms- reluctantly, to be rid of a nuisance, not out of any sympathy. (Vidya94)

According to a popular belief, the gender and identity of a person depend on how well they perform. The line separating the cisgender and the transgender group is created by our traditional culture. When heterosexual normativity predominates, transgender people are oppressed and abused. The term ‘gender’ refers to the duties and obligations that are formed for men and women in families, societies, and civilizations. It is based on how duties, roles, and responsibilities are perceived as belonging to men and women in society. The influence of gender and gender roles has its impact on an individual right from his/her childhood. As it is rightly pointed out in the paper entitled *The Social Construction of Third Genders in India*, “The term third gender is generally used to describe those people who transgress social gender norms and challenge the dichotomous gender binary construction” (Mushtaq). Hence to support this statement Gender Schema Theory can be used. Gender schema theories, therefore, look at how a child accumulates and interprets gender-related information. Schemas are viewed as dynamic knowledge structures wherein content changes in accordance with social interactions as well as other individual and cultural differences. They also differ in how they respond to situations and changes in perception caused further by ageing.

Readers encounter several ambiguities and questions as they read *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Tripathi. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi questions the so-called accepted gender performativity throughout the narrative. As a counteraction to this ambiguity, she begins to question her own sexuality:

This brought me to the question of sexuality. I had learnt from Ashok Row Kavi that I wasn’t abnormal. But then, what was going on inside my body? Though I was born a boy, how come I fell in love with boys and not with girls? Slowly, gradually, I came to the conclusion that I wasn’t a boy. I was a girl. But then I had a penis and testicles, not breasts. So how could I call myself a girl? I was bewildered. I did not have the answers to these difficult questions. I wanted to end my life. (Laxmi 22)

Laxmi Narayan engages in dancing, which is typically associated with womanhood, thereby breaking the traditional thinking of the heteronormative society. Hence, this also brings out the therapeutic effect that art has on a gender-variant individual:

Dancing saved me. It was the therapy I hadn't given up, in spite of going through turbulent times. In a way, it was my dancing, complete with my feminine movements of the waist, that contributed to my being thought of as effeminate. But I didn't care. I couldn't care less when I was younger, and I couldn't care less now. I began to take lessons in dancing from a professional dance teacher. Miss Menon, my teacher at Singhania School, was right. Dancing transported me to another world where I could be my true self. Everything else paled into insignificance when I was on stage. (Laxmi 23)

In an effort to dispel and confront preconceived ideas about transgender people, Laxmi encourages the reader to view them objectively. She writes of encounters with ongoing harassment, looks of disapproval, fear of being exposed to public settings, worries about not making it home alive, and many other things. But this oppressed community is currently getting over its concerns and beginning to speak up in front of the world, refusing to accept the invisibility that has been placed on its existence. They contend that having a transgender identity is an identity, not a disease. The disorientation that she feels about her male body and feminine feelings leads her to mental turmoil. She says:

And where was I in all this? How did I fit into such a scenario? True, I didn't have to support a family. But I, too, straddled many worlds, without belonging to any. As the eldest son of my parents, they expected me to be a man. They expected me to be manly, and eventually be the man of the house. I knew I couldn't fulfil these expectations because, inwardly, I did not feel like a man. On top of that, I was gay. Even if my parents overlooked my aberrations, society would not. I felt inadequate. I wanted to be addressed as a woman, not a man. I was in turmoil. (Laxmi 36-37)

The book redefines what a 'hijra' is and alters how people think about them. The concept of hijra is sociological in nature and not biological. Laxmi asserts, "There is the ghetto and there's the mainstream. My dominant identity was that of a hijra. I wanted to live with the hijras, but I also wanted to live in society. Luckily, for me, I was both a dancer and an activist. So, while activism enabled me to live in the ghetto, my dancing ensured that I was also a part of mainstream society" (Laxmi 118). Unlike Revathi and Vidya, Laxmi has the privilege of having family support and she acknowledges this gesture of her family. "I am a hijra and have been accepted by my family. This is rare in a culture where deviant sexuality is enough for parents to disown their offspring. Some hijras are initially kicked out by their families, and later welcomed when they start earning and sending them money. The money is often earned through sex work, but the parents have no qualms in accepting it. Doesn't this amount to pimping one's daughters?" (Laxmi 168-169).

Laxmi emphasises the impact that the society had on her in her initial days of hijrahood when she was terrified to accept her sexuality. With the confidence she gains from education and activism she breaks herself from the shackles of societal expectations. She says:

When I was young, I had an inferiority complex and society was responsible for it. But now I have a superiority complex. I have travelled all over the world. I have hobnobbed with the high and mighty. Films have been made on my life. Who can

deny that I am a celebrity? People laughed at me once, but today I have the last laugh. But then, I owe all this to my decision to become a hijra. It was a bold decision and it yielded rewards. Had I not become a hijra, I might have been any ordinary effeminate homosexual guy. Being a hijra made me glamorous and militant. At first, I seemed a stranger to myself. But over time, the timid, shy Laxminarayan of old, faded out of existence, and the Laxmi you see before you, aggressive, ready to fight the world, stood in his place. (Laxmi 169)

The only place where a hijra is completely accepted and considered is in the hijra community. Laxmi comments on the relevance and the reason for the formation of hijra communities:

When a person's biological and psychological and sexual identities are at odds with each other, he becomes a freak in the eyes of society. Society ostracises him. Overcome by feelings of isolation, such a person desperately seeks out others like him and bands with them. Together with them, he may decide to get rid of his male sexual organs, either through sex reassignment surgery or by having another hijra sever his private parts from the rest of his body, without anesthesia. Together, they may acquire breasts, either through hormone therapy or simply by sporting falsies. That is how hijra communities are formed. (Laxmi 172)

Laxmi provides readers with a specific note of the definition of the word 'hijra' for deeper comprehension. She states:

The word 'hijra' is a term of abuse. Its variants in colloquial language includes expressions like number six, number nine, and chakka. The word 'hijra' derives from the Urdu word 'hijar'. A hijar is a person who has walked out of his tribe or community. Thus, a hijra is one who has left mainstream society, comprising men and women, and joined a community of hijras. But the hijra community isn't a monolith. Its history and culture varies from state to state. (Laxmi 171)

Since ancient times, the heteronormative culture has oppressed transgender persons. Transgender people have, nonetheless, accomplished some significant progress. With the intention of being heard and accepted, transgender people write and express themselves in their own bodies. In doing so, they develop a voice to interact with conventional heteronormative societal structure, and as a result, body politics is established. The significance of transgender writers and hijra literature is mentioned in afterword of *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*:

Laxmi's autobiography is one of the earliest works that belong to the genre of hijra literature. It seeks to make readers aware of who the hijras really are, and what goes into the shaping of their personalities- yes, they do have personalities. It seeks to dispel myths about the hijras and help us shed our prejudices. One of Laxmi's primary endeavours is to show us that hijras are ordinary people, no different from us: they do not exist in a rarefied realm. And yet, Laxmi's autobiography must not be read in isolation, as a one-off text. Instead, it must be placed within the wider tradition of Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender (LGBT) writing in India. (Laxmi 183)

Conclusion:

The study investigates the effects of traumatising attitudes towards gender and how transgender people are able to accept the paradigm by reframing their own identities. Through these kinds of incidents and narratives, they criticise the inhumane living conditions and lack of citizenship rights of hijras. Transgender people are writing their accounts of transgender masculinity and transgender femininity in order to highlight the issues regarding trans identities. These texts deliberately promote the formation of identities while dispelling misconceptions about Hijras. They also provide details about an array of additional gender and sexual variations that exist in India, information that is essential for properly addressing their difficulties.

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