

Born to Live; The Struggles of Identity: Study of Revathi's Narrative *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*

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ABSTRACT

India is a country full of diversity. It is diverse in its culture, religion, sex, class and color. Sex as a matter of fact has always been diverse in its origin since ancient times and there has always been a wide acceptance of every religion, sex, and culture in our country since time immemorial. In ancient India we witness several tales starting from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* reaching to Aryabhatta's *Arthashastra*, these works highly witness the accounts of sexual diversity in the ancient Indian world. Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian mythologist gives us accounts of various incidents like those of Shikhandi and Brihnalla which claim that Transgenders had a good position back in the ancient times. What exactly changed the position of these individuals was colonization. Colonization or the advent of British rule in India proved out to be a major cause which led to the deteriorating position of the Transgender community. The Britishers by categorizing them as criminals brought several laws which ultimately lead to their marginalization. The 2014 verdict of the Supreme Court however served a major historical change which seemed to be a ray of hope for the entire community. The aim of this paper is to bring forth the existing notions of gender and sexuality and its various alternatives in the Indian context. The researcher primarily aims to present her various interpretations through an in-depth study of India's first transgender autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2015). The paper will shed a major light on sexuality in India and its various understandings in the Indian context.

Keywords: *Transgender, Queerness, Colonization, Marginalization, Binary, Hijra, Trans-sexuality.*

Introduction

Inclusiveness is the backbone of our Indian culture. It is one of the most important aspects of our Indian culture for which it has been hailed world widely. India is widely known for its

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diversity and secularism. It's a country which is rich in its culture and people. Despite being diverse in its culture, religion, and sexuality, our society has always maintained uniform approach towards gender and sexuality and has always favored the notion of gender binary. Gender and sex are two different terms that are used interchangeably at large, however they differ in their usage. Sex which is a biological aspect of an individual gets determined by chromosomes, hormones, and the way they interact and is something assigned to an individual at birth. Gender on the other hand is a social construction which relates to behaviors and attributes based on the labels of masculinity and femininity. Gender identity to say is a personal, and an internal perception of oneself which may not always align with a person's physique.

Our gender identity is determined by who we relate to, male or female and those who do not relate to either are referred to as 'Third Gender'. Earlier evidences referring to foundational texts like "Manu Smriti which lays the foundation of the Hindu law, explains the origin of the three sexes." (Mishra4) The existence of Third Gender has been witnessed since ancient times yet the society has greatly neglected them at large. Our society in general considers male and female as normal and others who do not match to their biological traits are considered inhuman and abnormal. The sex assignment of a person takes place at the time of conception decides our gender-based on the genital at the time of birth the medical institution labels the gender of the child. But the answer to the question where do those individuals find a place that remains in between- remains unanswered. The society accepts only the male and female as normal and debarred those who identify themselves as Transgender or what we today label as 'Third Gender'. The Third Gender despite being an identity, suffer in mediocrity. This biological phenomenon which occurs due to mismatching of chromosomes during conception, later in the hands of society becomes a mark of discrimination and subjugation. The utterance of these marginalized groups who are traumatized remain unheard which leads to their marginalization at large.

Our society plays a major role in the construction of these notions of gender and sex. What we once witnessed as a boon in the ancient world became a curse after the colonization period which made "an attempt to systematically erase the Hijras, who were the most visible form of transgender in India." (Mishra11) The marginalization of transgender happens in all the four corners of the world and in every instance they face this otherness. The marginalization which they face is a mark of the socio, cultural practices that are practiced in our country since so long, and those who conform to the rules enjoy acceptance while others are neglected, insulted

and harassed at every phase of their life. These callous practices leads them to live a life based on social standards as a result many do not express their identity while others lose their life in this bewildering stage. Transgender in India as Mishra writes, are usually referred to by their local terms such as “Hijra, Aravani, Kothi,, Jogappas, Shiv Shaktis, Thirunambis, Bhaiyya, Pottais And Paiyyan.”(Mishra25)

The colonization period had a drastic impact on the situation of Transgender in India. Transgender in the hands of British officials were victimized and put down into the fringes of the society. The judgment of the Supreme Court 2014 which “not only categorically ruled that transgender people should be recognized as a third gender who can enjoy all fundamental rights but also upheld the right to self determination of gender.” (Mishra96) served to be an ointment to the prevailing conditions of transgender community as a result we see many writers and activist coming forward with their personal experiences giving their society a legal existence which the law calls as Third Gender.

Literature as a field of study has provided these writers to mark a new move in their existing phenomenon and create their own literature, “Transgender Literature.” Transgender writers have come up with their personal experiences in the forms of autobiographies, memoirs, biography, short stories, and articles. These writers through their works are trying to assert their existence as an identity and challenge the heteronormative discourses that have been prevalent since ages. The writers try to interrogate the basic misconceptions that had gobbled up the entire world regarding sexuality. “By publicly assuming their gender identity, they are challenging the heteronormative discourses that have imprisoned them for ages for being the deviants.”(Foucault, 1988:43)

A. Revathi in her autobiography on a similar account notes: “Despite the losses I had suffered, I somehow managed to finish writing my book, Unarvum, Urunamum.” (300)

It is no surprise that the narratives by transgender writers have added a new attitude to our understanding of the intricacies of transgender community that they face in their life and also bring into light the fact that gender and sexuality is a social construction.

They are a compilation of history and culture of the Hijras and their opposition to the dominance of modern knowledge systems which create insidious processes of stigmatization, discrimination, marginalization, pathologization and confinement operating at the level of social perception common sense, judicial system, family state and medical system.” (Foucault1988 80-81)

Through the narratives the writers meticulously try to depict the exclusion, unacceptance, discrimination, injustice that transgender face at large in this patriarchal world which as Balaev in his essay Trends in Literary Trauma Theory notes is “repetitious, timeless unspeakable, yet, it is also a literal, contagious and mummified event,” (151) this clearly posits it’s dual nature both unspeakable yet present- timeless yet repetitively re-lived in time. The discrimination and exclusion does not confine to personal space but is practiced on a social level to make the transgender feel excluded in every arena thus making it private yet collective. Despite the challenges they face the writers have come forward to speak for their rights and have tried to challenge what we today label as ‘Transphobia’.

A Question on Identity: Her deeper Insights

Transgender literature in the recent years has gained progress in the Indian society because of the efforts of the writers who have come forward with their experiences to talk about their identity. The paper tries to bring into acquaintance the life of transgender through a detailed study of their literature and focuses on the narrative *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* India’s first autobiography by a transgender. Revathi, who is a writer and an activist, has laid the grounds in the English canon by her remarkable experiences which shed a light on sexuality and its various practices in the Indian context. Hijra literature in general takes the form of narratives through which the author tries to portray their life agonies and intricacies. This privileges the “act of speaking or narration as the primary avenue to recovery.”(Balaev151) By challenging the heteronormative world Revathi has tried to challenge these binary notions of patriarchy. Her book presents the throbbing traumatic experiences she had to go for being a woman in a man’s body. Her work reveals the wounds and the bruises that her body had to bear for being a transgender and how the heteronormative society discarded her existence and made her a mark of sin and disgust for the society and its people. These throbbing experiences in the words of Michelle Balaev patho-logically divides identity and “is employed by the literary scholar as a metaphor to describe the degree of damage done to the individual's coherent sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience.” (Balaev150) These traumatic experiences further create a “temporal gap” (150) and a dissolution of the individual’s self. She starts the work by setting a preface to her narrative which says:

As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of society, yet I have dared to share my innermost life with you- about being a hijra and also doing sex work. My story is not meant to offend, accuse or hurt anyone’s

sentiments. My aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their culture, and their dreams and desires. (v)

Revathi who was born a boy named Doraiswamy, began her life in village Namakkal Taluk as the youngest of all her four siblings. Born into a Brahmin family with male genital, the medical institution thus decided her gender as a male and so was she expected to behave accordingly. Doraiswamy as a boy never had the urge to be a man and live in the state of manhood. Her urges turned out to be exactly the opposite of what her family expected. Her male body always nurtured the desires of feminine hood and could never relate to what her body appeared-so much so that her life started feeling like a cage giving her a feeling of entrapment as she writes:

A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered a man. I longed to be with men, but felt shamed by this feeling. I wondered why god had chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why he could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. Why am I a flawed being, I wondered often. (15)

She narrates these copious experiences of her life where she reveals her high desires of being a female and act feminine. Her childhood memories reveal the time she had to face mockery, ridicule, and harassment for behaving in a feminine way. She writes about how she was called names like 'number nine', 'pottai' by her classmates and others in her village.

But boys at school, as well as men and women who saw me outside the house, would call out 'hey, number 9!', 'female thing', and 'female boy'. Some even teased me, saying, 'Aren't you a boy? Why do you walk like a girl? Why do you wear girls' clothes?' I understood that I was indeed like that. In fact I wanted to be so. (4)

These episodes of trauma which remains in her mind subconsciously do not have immediate response but leaves a rupture to her psyche which gets resonated in her later years. As a child Revathi like any other Transgender had to be a victim of confusion regarding her identity. She could not really understand how her inner feelings were reacting to the way she looked. Understanding Revathi's insights and confusions Dr. Sinha writes

His confusion related to the identity construction is a manifestation of the society. In a society where man and woman are identified according to their dress and behavior, Doraisamy before his transformation into Revathi found that he was in a marginalized position because he was normal- he was a womanly man. He does not have any pretence. From the bottom of his heart he wanted to be a woman, marry an educated man. (Sinha 65)

I could not talk to anyone about my confusion. Not to my brothers, or my parents. Nor could I stop my heart from wandering and so I went about as if crazed. I was fed up with being teased, and besides was not doing well in my English classes. (9)

The traumatic experiences as Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience* notes are contagious since “trauma is never simply one's own [. . .] [but] precisely the way we are implicated in each others's traumas.”(24) What Caruth states clearly resonates Revathi's experience how her experiences are interconnected with those of her family members and others in society- and how this reverberates throughout her relationships and community. This clearly states trauma as relational- since it does not only affect the subject who experiences it directly but also the ones associated with it- either actively or passively. We witness in the quest of her identity Revathi had to face a trauma that caused her a desire to almost join the majority- not only affecting her psychological health but her related ones as well. From being mocked at school, to facing harassment by her neighbors and family members all these incidents reveal how our society at large excludes those who do not conform to its established notions. Revathi who faced copious confusion in her childhood could not even get her family support, her parents and siblings could never think of her as a Trans child who was in her ways manifesting her inner desires of drawing a kolam and doing household chores which vividly express her inner self showing womanly traits and clearly uncovers the cultural aspect of our society where certain acts are predetermined as per gender notions. Since her birth we witness the seeds of femininity had been sown into her that finds resonance as she grows. From wearing her sisters clothes at home to participating in woman's guise in cultural programmes are some instances where she would fulfill her inner desires. “As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my sister's long towel around my head and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I was a shy bride, my eyes to the ground, and everyone would laugh.” (4)

These acts of physical and psychological violence clearly describe the traumas that transgender bodies witness which echoes Cathy Caruth's views on trauma who in her *Unclaimed Experience* notes trauma as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs is often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon.”(11) Revathi throughout her life had to go through abuse and violence which not having an immediate response later on in her life becomes a mark of guilt and sufferings for her. This gender violence she faces not only by the society but also at her personal space and the agony of a woman trapped in a cage is seen evidently when she comes back to her family after becoming a chela to her guru. The violence that she faces at the hands of her brothers reveals the stereotypical thoughts of our society which lead to violation of their rights:

As soon as I stepped in, he shut the door, grabbed a cricket bat, and began hitting me, all the while screaming, ‘that’ll teach you to go with those Number 9s. Let’s see you wear a saree again, or dance, you mother fucking pottai! He beat me hard mindlessly, yelling that he wanted to kill me, I who had dared to run away. I tried to protect my face and head with my hands to keep the blows from falling....that’s right. Beat him and break his bones. Only then will he stay at home and not run away’, I heard my mother say... (55)

Alongside physical violence the intricacies of the psychological trauma is witnessed throughout the narrative. The act of writing here recreates the traumatic events immersing the reader in her lived experiences. The moment when her brothers shaved her hair to erase her feminine traits permanently though not having any immediate effect caused a psychological and physical drama which remains subconsciously in her mind like “an intruder or ghost.”(Luckhurst499) “At the temple, when my hair was shorn off I felt more pain than I did when my brother thrashed me. I prayed fervently: ‘amma! Why must I suffer like this? Why must you put me through this ordeal?’ ” (57)

The Hijra community is highly concerned of respect. Living by their customs and traditions is one of their most important rules of living a Hijra life. Within the Hijra community as Revathi writes in order to become a chela one has to abide by the rules that their elders ask them to follow. They are required to follow their customs and practices in order to survive reverently in the community. Any Hijra in order to live a respectful life has to appear in saree attire with long hair, nose pin and bangles. While narrating her life experiences she emphasizes the importance of dress code in the Hijra culture.

If born a pottai, and when living among pottais, it is important that a person pierces her ears and nose, and grows her hair. If you merely wear press button earrings and a wig, no one really respects you. Likewise, if you happen to see a man crossing your path, you’re expected to make way for him, bend your head bashfully and make sure that your chest is covered. (47)

The narrative clearly reflects on duality of the Hijra system which one hands provides them security and in the other sometimes becomes a pressure in their life thus leads to a loss of freedom. Despite living a life of rules and regulations the society does not accept them and marks them as untouchables and deviants. Revathi in her narrative openly talks about the lives of Transgender in India and the hardships they had to face in a country which is so diverse in culture yet too uniform in its approach towards sexuality. Her story captures the heart wrenching experiences of her life that she had to face in order to live a life of her own terms. She reveals the agonizing experience of her sex change operation- her parents’ reaction to her nirvana and becoming a chela to her guru as terrific. The narrative reflects on both the

sacredness and poignant experiences of the process. All she ended up with was betrayal and abuses at every point of her time- her visit to her home after her nirvana the aftereffects describe, “He beat me hard mindlessly, yelling that he wanted to kill me, I who had dared to run away. I tried to protect my face and head with my hands to keep the blows from falling.” (55)

Not only at her personal space did she get abuses but in the society also she was abused for being a Hijra. Revathi’s experience tells us about the struggles that a Hijra has to bear in order to work and earn for her living. The society does not allow them to work and earn respectfully. The government itself does not provide any kind of assistance to the Hijra community to get employment and live respectfully. In order to live their life and earn for their needs they end up doing sex work and are delved into prostitution. The situation becomes vulnerable when sex work itself becomes a mark of curse for them. They are exploited in the hands of men, who use them for mere lust. On a similar note Revathi shares the heart wrenching phase of her life when she was brutally exploited for her profession,

I felt trapped and not knowing what to do, I had to accede to his demands. I held onto his legs and pleaded when he wanted me to do things that I did not like doing. (He wanted me to have anal sex with him) he spat abuse at me and forced me into the act. When I screamed in pain and yelled for my guru, he shut my mouth with one of his hands, whipped out a knife with the other and threatened to take it to my throat. I was hurting all over, and yet had to give in and do as he told me. The skin down there felt abraded and I was bleeding. Unmindfully he left but only after he had snatched my purse away from me. (108)

This physical trauma, violence, abuse, and unacceptance has remained an all pervasive phenomena for Hijra community which can only be expressed when performed either through literature or any art. The Hijra community in India is trapped within this social, political, economic marginalization that has been in fashion since ages which as Caruth notes is transhistorically passed and does not remain fixed to any age but goes on timeless thus producing a ‘post traumatic culture’. (3) Revathi’s narrative in eyes of Caruth becomes a means through which the unsaid can be heard and understood by all. Trans people who have been silenced historically and pathologized by medical institutions are always subject to violence and traumas which is returned through generations thus forms what Caruth calls a ‘post traumatic culture’. (3) These works has no doubt attempted to give a break to this process of gender discrimination and put a question to the heteronormative discourses.

These experiences that she has been a witness of openly “indicates that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living

centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience.” (Balaev152) The narratives addressing Butler’s ideas have tried to bring this into light that gender is a social construction and has nothing to do with our biological traits. Third sex is an identity not a curse or sin- it is an existence not an absence of anything. All she claims through her narrative are the rights of transgender/ Hijras that they are worthy of. Humans need to be accepted for who they are irrespective of their sex. All she asks for is love, respect, and acceptance as she states in one of her concluding lines:

Besides, at a time when many of my contemporaries were bosses in their own right, I would have to remain a worker. Though I’d had my chances, I had not chosen to become a boss- I had chosen to remain alone, alienated from the community. Finally, I went back to work Sangama. (303-304)

Conclusion

The land of India is an amalgamation of its different culture, customs and traditions. It’s a land that bears diversity in terms of its sex, race, religion, and culture. Our land is a mother to the variety that it offers to its mankind. Sex and gender has always been a matter of discussion in our society which is widely acceptable of its various existences but despite being so much broad in its approach towards diversity, there are still some areas where it follows a very rigid approach. The existence of Third gender in India is highly disputable, and the attitude with which they are treated is excruciating. Third-gender in every field goes through marginalization and no doubt there are innumerable stigmas that are attached to their survival. The autobiography discussed in the paper deals with the personal experiences of Revathi a transgender who narrates her life as one filled with distress, agonies and intricacies. The narrative brings out the fundamental issues of gender and sexuality as prevalent in the society since ancient times and shares the hurdles that a Hijra has to face in order to transcend the social norms and live a life of her own terms. Revathi’s narrative acts as a mirror through which we can peep into her life and understand the atrocities that the transgender community faces for their Third gender identity and the struggles they endure to fit into the mainstream society.

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