



## UNVEILING THE VEIL THROUGH TRANSGENDER NARRATIVES OF A. REVATHI AND LAXMINARAYAN TRIPATHI

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**ABSTRACT:** Transgenders in India have been hiding under veils to protect themselves from being judged, teased and harassed. The two narratives in the paper discuss the coming out two brave hijras who underwent massive agony and pain to come out of their nutshell of living dubious lives and follow however they want to be. Hijras in India live at the peripheries of the society because they have been discarded the status of a human being because of their form, dress, language and mannerisms by heteronormative and patriarchal social systems. The paper is an attempt to throw light on the harrowing conditions faced by the transgenders in India and give them some motivation to come out of the closet without and shame or guilt. Revathi who is a castrated hijra, and Laxmi who is not had to undergo boulders of trouble to survive in the patriarchal and even worse heterosexual society of India wherein people with different ideas, clothes, attitudes etc. are just sidelined from the main-stream society and are harassed from day to day. The paper also discusses the role of gender identity and how it shaped up for the two authors.

**KEYWORDS:** transgenders, veils, hijras, heterosexual, harassment.

### I. INTRODUCTION:

The words – closet and veil – are common in their sense. Both words call for a person who shuts himself within. Whether out of fear, to escape the cruel and callous eyes of the society and the world, eyes that poke and mock; or it may be because of compulsion as *coming out* of the veil or the closet could pose problems of massive proportions and would bring with it some sort of punishment. Maybe it could arise from a need to feel safe and secure with oneself or by being one with the Almighty. Or another one could be that the person is absolutely at peace with himself and coming out or unveiling is something that they do not seek in any way. The main idea here is that each one of these people take part in a distinct but complex type of relationship, be with the closet or the veil. What can be created from such relationships is the variables of meanings and of inhabited experiences, i.e., of closets and veils – in plurality.

A vicious crime has been done by the Eurocentric lens, which reduced this closet space and the veil to the binaries – in vs out, oppression vs emancipation; which further has led to the alterations in the psyche of the society as a whole and has corrupted the old traditions and cultural practices which was a part of deep-rooted system but now has come to a point of ignorance, mockery, and pushing the to the peripheries. But with the ever-changing time, the people hidden in their veils or hiding in their closets are coming. Slowly, trying to make a place for themselves in the society, challenging the downtrodden norms and demanding a change in their status. Education has always been one such arena where people from all strata of the society have looked upon at, whether to receive help, or to portray feelings, to entertain or to inform. The idea to this may seem very simple but produces ever lasting impact on the minds of the readers who are seeking a change in the world. The very same idea has been reviewed by the transgender community in India who are writing their narratives to depict their struggle, highlight injustice, and demand equality.

In the words of Joseph Pulitzer comes a very important and guiding message, “Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light.” (Pulitzer, 1914:68) And till date this statement is the major guiding spirit for anyone who tries to write his life story. Personal narrative is the broader term comprising of autobiographies and memoirs. Literature is actually a collection of various written works, but the art of writing and being literary does not accord for the words written on a page only; but the effect produced by those words is what counts. Not only pleasure, the work of literature is to broadly function in the society by promoting and criticizing cultural values. It has the power to show reflection of human actions and behaviour by urging a corrective behaviour to bring about a change in positive sense by reaching the minds of the larger population. The new millennium has seen many brave writings come

up in Indian sub-context itself. Writings of queers in India gained progress because a segment of society which felt unseen and unheard decided to come out. Their decision of coming out of their bubbles led to a major uprising in the minds of Indian heteronormative people for whom the division of society was clear – men who were born with male genitalia, and women who were born with female genitalia. So, to understand concepts of queerness became a problem. Learning about the problems and issues faced by such individuals on a daily basis became unimaginable. But as it is said that the pen is mightier than sword, the queer population in India took up pen to talk about themselves, their community, their issues, problems, pain, and the treatment they receive from the society. As Revathi says: “hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work” (Revathi, 2010: v) To answer the questions that Foucault once asked, the idea of producing discourse fits perfectly:

For me, the enormous potential of this writing is that it conjures up the four enunciative discourses: (1) who is speaking? the *hijras*; (2) From what site are they speaking? from a marginalized group (3) Why do they speak? to have their rights recognized by law (4) To whom do they speak? to a world which rejects them and dispossesses them of humanity (qtd. in Wandel, 2009).

The term transgender, being a part of the LGBTQIA community loosely referred as the queer community, typically means anyone who does not fit the categories of gender heteronormativity. The term transgender suits anyone who does not associate himself with the gender binaries set up by the heteronormative society. The two designated gender roles are that of a man and a woman and anyone who does not behave within these patterns is seen as an outcast and known as a transgender. A boy born with male genitalia is supposed to behave as a boy. He should be strong, must not cry and should pursue women for his sexual inclination, whereas a girl born with female genitalia should behave as a girl – be fragile, should speak in hushed tones, wear pink colour, and pursue men. Transgenders are those people who does not conform to these binaries and feel differently from the cut-out gender roles and ideas.

In Indian subcontinent, the first transgender autobiography which appeared was of A. Revathi, who gave a full account of narration of her transition from a man to a woman. The book named *The Truth about Me – Life Story of a Hijra* (2010) is one-of-a-kind books which explicitly covers the horrors, struggle, and recollection of personal details of Revathi’s life. Dr. Sinha in one of her articles about Revathi says:

The autobiographical account of Revathi presents the painful picture of her life. On one hand her story symbolizes the nature-culture binary and it is also problematizing gender mainstreaming. The claim of humanity is constitution of human. It is Revathi’s claim of humanity to consider her not as someone from the sexuality minority community but an ordinary human being. She could fill the irreducible gap between the marginalized and the “normal” beings. Revathi’s struggle is a living symbol for thousands of identities like Revathi. (Sinha, 2016: 68)

Revathi was born as Doraiswamy, a boy, and that’s where it all began. She was born with male genitalia and was the younger son of the family with two elder brothers and an elder sister. Having born into a body of a male, he was expected to abide by the gender roles of that of a man/boy. But he craved femininity. His feminine spirit always felt trapped in a man’s body:

A woman trapped in a man’s body was how I thought of myself. [...] 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 [...] and all the time I was obsessed, confused and anxious. (Revathi, 2010:15)

Doraiswamy, from his very childhood displayed characteristics of a girl. He felt refuge in wearing woman’s clothes and playing the role of female characters in his school’s annual functions. It is noteworthy that wearing appropriate gender clothes is one of the markers of heteronormative code of conduct, whereas transvestism or cross-dressing is considered as the main source of fulfillment of desire by the trans community; because of his womanly mannerisms, he became a laughingstock of mockery and ridicule at school. His parents thought that once he would grow up, he would become a man.

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 behaviour Doraiswamy, before his transformation into Revathi, found that he was in a marginalized position because he was not ‘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, 2016:65)

In the quest of his identity, Doraiswamy went through unimaginable trauma. From being beaten up by his parents, to being harassed by children at school and then raped by his own family members. At all steps, he was pointed out, scolded, made fun of, and faced harassment. In order to find himself, he kept on going. He met with new people who helped him meet new people and so on. Ultimately her quest led him to a hijra group, who instantly connected with him and gave him the new name Revathi. Being treated as an equal and yearning to be a woman yet been given equal respect as that of other human beings are some of the basic desires of transgenders in a country like India. Revathi is no different. Revathi's narrative is not just hers, but highlights the plight, condition and oppression faced by the Hijra community in India. By speaking for herself, she is speaking for all Hijras who are not as blessed with education as Revathi is.

The hijra community in India is thus enmeshed in the mire of lingual, sartorial and economic colonization. And, it is A. Revathi who through her autobiography, for the first time, bravely attempts to challenge and break this cyclic process of gender colonization and heteronormative discourse. To narrate the everyday life of a hijra was not so easy, it was not so easy to re-live all those moments of agony and brutal torture, but Revathi took the trouble to do so only with a hope that after the publication of this autobiography, a hijra is no longer "started at" and "laughed" (Revathi, 2010:83) but rather considered as a human being. (Samanta, 2017:223)

Revathi, in her narrative, very boldly talks about the lives of transsexuals in India, the way they are treated (even worse than animals), and her story also captures the harrowing details of her sex change operation.

The frankness and fearlessness with which she discusses even the most 'private' aspects of her life as a hijra- the details of her sex change operation, her sexual encounters with her customers, the brutal sexual assault by police and so on- is striking and admirable. Her critique of social constructions of gender and dominant notions of masculinity- bereft of theoretical jargon, and precisely because of this, lucid and compelling is a powerful plea for us to radically reconsider what it means to be male and female at the same time as it urges us to seek the third way- of transcending the rigid binary division between male and female and work towards a notion of humanness beyond and above gender as conventionally understood. (Sikand, 2010)

Revathi's struggle did not end there. After reaching her *nirvana* i.e. her sexual reassignment surgery, she lived with her new hijra family for two months. After which she decided to come home and disclose her identity to her family, only to her agony treated her brutally:

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. But nevertheless they came down hard, and I felt my hand swell. I was beaten on my legs, on my back, and finally my brother brought the bat down heavily on my head. My skull cracked and there was blood all over, flowing, warm, "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. (Revathi, 2010:55)

This was a blow to Revathi's beliefs and ideals. In that moment of pain and agony, Doraiswamy became Revathi. Though her miseries did not end there, but she found the courage to accept her new identity. The identity she was living with in secret, in her closet, is out in the open and she considered herself brave enough to stand for it and face the consequences.

The other autobiography which could prove an inspiration to come out of the closet or lift their veil by asking for equality and respect in societal opus is *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) by Laxminarayan Tripathi. In her narrative, Laxmi offers the story of a child born as a boy in an orthodox family of Brahmins yearning to be a woman. The secret double life of transgenders who live by themselves and act in the way they want to only in secrecy of their own self.

Despite its provocative title, *Me Hijra me Laxmi* is foremost the story of an exceptional human being. It is an account of how Laxminarayan Tripathi, the eldest son of an orthodox Brahmin family, became Laxmi, a hijra who made history. The memoir gives us a first- person perspective of Laxmi's experiences and struggle; good and bad, profound and frivolous. We meet the people who transformed her into the person that she is today: an activist, artist, celebrity, ambassador and phenomenal catalyst for change, for her community and country. On a personal level, the reader is also introduced to the child, the dancer, the lover, the woman, the friend, the hijra and the dutiful son. (Shabbir, 2015)

In another article about the text, the critic Ishrat Jahan mentions the hardships faced by Laxmi throughout her life and the pathetic conditions faced by Hijras in India. She says:

She also talked about the bitter truth of her life. How she was sexually abused in her early childhood due to feminine feeling and gesture? Not only by her relatives but outsiders also. From her early childhood,

she was unable to find her identity as woman or man. When she was in fourth standard, she joined a gay group of Ashok Row Kavi. She had several love affairs with many boys, forcibly or due to self-interest since her childhood. Unfortunately, she was used by boys sexually such as an object and abandoned by them later. (Ishrat, 2021: 489)

Laxmi in her book gives out an accurate definition of the term 'hijra'. She says:

The word "hijra" is a term of abuse. Its variants in colloquial language include expression 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. (Tripathi, 2015:171)

Right from the time she became a hijra, Laxmi who thought her worries will end saw a dramatic rise in the state of oppression faced by hijras on everyday basis. The social ostracism is the leading cause of mental trauma in the third gendered people. Sex work being the prime occupation, issues keep arising which depict the position of hijras in the Indian society:

In our group only Sangeeta, Mardana, and Vardaan did sex work. Soon the police began to harass them. There were bitter quarrels between the cops and the girls, and they landed up at the Sheelfata police station. Though these girls were not my chelas, they were hijras all the same, and the police had been brutal in their dealings with them. (Tripathi, 2015:53)

The law is one platform where each and every individual is treated at the same place but for hijras, law is also meaningless because of the constant assault they face from the police and authorities. This became a true nightmare for Laxmi when Subhadra who went for sex work, went missing and then was later reported dead. Police who was not ready to file the complaint first, ended up finding no clue or evidence to support her death. Then Laxmi realizes the "dangers of being a hijra." (Tripathi, 2015:55) This incident led to a different kind of inner uprising in her and became the prime focal point for her pursuing activism. "Our fight with the world seemed so pointless. But we couldn't give up and fight either. The world would only be too happy to silence us. But we couldn't afford to be silenced. We couldn't afford to be thrown in jails and forgotten altogether" (Tripathi, 2015:56)

Laxmi's commendable activism work is worth noting in her autobiography. She started by working for an NGO called as DWS wherein her work was to make the sex workers aware of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. She has taken gigantic steps through her awareness campaigns, special talks in conferences like UN, and constantly worked to uplift the status of Hijras in Indian society. Her breakthrough came when she was called to deliver a talk in the Sixteenth World Aids Conference in Canada.

The most common misconception about Hijras is that they all are castrated, but that is absolutely false. Revathi is a castrated transgender but Laxmi is not, but the treatment they both received from their families and the society in general is same – cold, callous and brutal. The psychological chaos and unable to feel themselves in their own bodies, quest for identity, constant tormenting between the inner feelings and the expectations to behave in a certain way imposed by the heterosexual society, all brings out trauma, pain and agony to the lives of transgender people, which further makes the coming out process even more troublesome and difficult. But what's meant to be can't be hidden, what needs to come out will eventually come out.

Finding one's gender identity is a personal process. It uncovers itself over a period of time but starts to show through clothing, mannerisms and choices. The heterosexual society has discarded this supposition and has always supported the binary fixation of gender identities that a child of certain gender i.e. male or female needs to follow the laid down rules of being a boy and a girl. A boy behaving as a girl or a girl dressing up or doing works made for men would be atrocious to this heterosexual mentality. Queer theory highly rejects the laid down rules by the heterosexual society and demands independence in allowing the child to find his/her own gender identity and also demands to normalize having trans-identity.

The question of gender-appropriate behaviour is thus inextricably linked to legitimate procreative sexuality. That is, sexuality strictly policed to ensure the purity and continuation of crucial identities, such as, caste, race and religion. Non-heterosexual desire threatens the continuation of these identities since it is not biologically directly procreative; and if non-heterosexual people have children by other means, such

as technological interventions or adoption, then the purity of these identities is under threat. (Menon, 2012:4)

For Laxmi the knowledge of being 'different' came by the age of seven. Different because she wasn't like other boys of her age. She loved being indoors, wearing her mother's sarees and dancing. Whereas for Revathi, the knowledge came to her by nine, who used to come home from school and dress up in her sister's clothes.

As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a 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. No one thought much of it then, for I was little. They reasoned, 'he'll outgrow all this when he grows older,' and didn't say much else. (Revathi, 2010:4)

The effeminate mannerisms came naturally to both the protagonists and as a consequence, they have been ridiculed at school and also have been harassed. When Revathi started to grow, she felt in herself the "irrepressible femaleness," (Revathi, 2010:14) and the whole process of uncovering their gender identity also brought many questions with itself:

A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. But 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 me to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why He could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. (Revathi, 2010:15)

But where was I in all this? How could 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 couldn't fulfil these expectations because, inwardly, I did not feel like a man. (Tripathi, 2015:37)

The effeminate mannerisms started to take over the manly ways i.e. the feminine identity was actually trying to make way for itself in a masculine body. Both Revathi and Tripathi's confusion is due to the norm of gender performativity, because the heterosexual society has orthodox behavioural pattern which manifests such confusion in the minds of the people who do not wish to follow that path. But with each passing day, the desire to live life like a woman became stronger and stronger in both the protagonists and thus by removing all shackles they decided to 'come out of their closet' and accept their fate by being a hijra.

From episodes of cross-dressing, to openly addressing their gender identity the journey of coming out of both the narrators have not been easy. But the way they have described their journey, the pain and agony they endured to accept what was rightly theirs is marvelous. In order to support their bold choices, the Hijras usually succumb to sex-work or live on the little amount they get by blessing the new couple or new-born baby in Indian households. Their quest for identity has been difficult but both, brave women accepted all their challenges head on and has become inspiration for other transgenders to come out of their veil.

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