

CHALLENGES OF SELF-REPRESENTATION: LAXMI NARAYAN TRIPATHI'S *ME HIJRA, ME LAXMI* AS TRANSGENDER RESISTANCE LITERATURE

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Abstract

Indian academic circles infrequently discuss the rights of the third gender. The Hijra group is considered the most underdeveloped and disadvantaged group in the country. There is a very recent and sporadic availability of critical literature on the third gender. Even more so, on the second and third gender combined and collected. For the differently sexed sections, the aspect of identity is very sensitive, pressing and pertinent. As a result, the area needs further exploration and insight. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi has significantly contributed in the well-being of the community and sets herself as an example of the empowered hijra. The study is titled "Challenges of Self-Representation: Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* as Transgender Resistance Literature" and it analyses how Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's maiden autobiography is an integral part of the identity discourse of India's third gender. It studies the life of Laxmi Tripathi and her life as a transgender activist. The autobiography is scrutinized from the parameters of identity formation, the significance of guru-chela relationship, the uniqueness of the hijra community apart from the social problems of marginalization that the community faces. Most of the hijras come from the lowest strata of society and fail at acquiring the education needed for employment. This creates a vicious circle of unemployment which amplifies their marginalization. Therefore, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* will be studied using the traditional gender approach as explained by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* and "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution". The study will also scrutinize the role of education, optimism and emancipation in Tripathi's narrative.

Keywords: Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, Transgender, Resistance Literature, Autobiography, Third gender

INTRODUCTION

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi was born in 1979 in Thane (Maharashtra), India, into a traditional Brahmin family. She was born as a male at birth. She is an LGBT activist, a trained dancer, an actress and a motivational speaker. One of very few highly educated transgenders of India, Tripathi has acquired an arts degree from University of Mumbai and a post-graduate degree in Bharatnatyam, an Indian classical dance form. It was through Shabina – India's first PhD trans student – that Tripathi got introduced to the Indian hijra community and eventually tasted social activism. This research article is titled "Challenges of Self-Representation: Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* as Transgender Resistance Literature" and it intends to explore Laxmi's maiden autobiography as an assertion of third gender identity, using Butlerian ideas in *Gender Trouble* and her essay on gender performativity. The article will also underline the role education and activism played in Laxmi's emancipation.

Laxmi wondered that even though she was born a boy, how come she 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?" (22). This feeling alienated Laxmi because she believed that being a homosexual and being a woman meant the same thing. Eventually, she met the right people and discovered that she is a transgender and her autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* represents the true Hijra culture.

The autobiography is a testimony of the Hijra culture. Laxmi says that people are very curious to know about the Hijra – "How do we live? Behave? What do we do? Do we kidnap children? What funeral rites are performed for a hijra after her death? She cremated or buried?" (155). Laxmi answers these questions. She says that hijras live an ordinary life like normal people. She called the hijras as "underdogs" and that they are not given the due respect human beings deserve. They have no official recognition, except for the Aadhaar card by

the Indian government and this is why the hijras are “destitute” (155). They are separated from the family and eventually ostracized by the society who doesn’t care about “where our next meal comes from” (155). Laxmi believes that “all crimes have a social dimension” and that is why when hijras commit a crime, they are beaten up badly and the police happily presses charges against them. They live in ghettos. It is a general belief of the public that all the hijras are castrated. Laxmi also provides insights into this reality and says that the hijras call it “Nirvana” – a process of castration that is “strictly optional” (156). Many hijras opt for breast implants and even if the surgery is expensive, Laxmi believes that, “our transformation is incomplete” without the implants. Laxmi also dispels many of the myths that surround the hijra community. Through the autobiography, she brushes off all such prejudices against her community. The first myth she addresses is the belief of the society that the hijras receive orders that forces people to kidnap and convert children into their community. She clears the air and says that in many cases when one becomes a hijra, “the doors to one’s earlier life are shut forever” (157). That person reacts strangely to his/her family and it is in “self-defence” that the person lies of being forced into hijrahood. She addresses the second myth that is widely believed in Indian society, “about the funeral of a Hijra (which) is performed late in the night and she is beaten with slippers” (158). Laxmi dismisses this myth and calls it “rubbish” (158). The last rites of the deceased hijra is done in a very normal manner as in case of a man or a woman – a Hindu gets cremated and a Muslim or a Christian gets buried. When they die, an artificial penis is made out of cotton or *atta* (wheat flour) to commemorate the fact that the deceased was actually born a male (177). She shares with her readers that hijras are also taught how to harass in order to extract money from the public. The hijra community believes that this is a revenge on society for ostracizing them and marginalizing their life (175).

Me Hijra Me Laxmi opens doors to the world of the hijra community. So proudly and unabashedly does Laxmi narrate her life, it borders on glamorizing the beauty of identity of the third gender. She discloses the becoming of a hijra and the *gharana* or the clan of the hijra. It begins with a thread ceremony, like that of the Brahmans, and the person is initiated into the community. Then, the charter of the hijra rituals and regulations are explained:

How a Hijra must walk and how she must serve water to a visitor. While serving in the water... The glass must be balance on palms joined together. The pallu of the Hijra’s sari mustn’t touch anyone as she moves around... The guru’s clothes mustn’t be worn by the chela, nor should she utter the name of her guru or ghanrana. (159)

Laxmi broke many rules and rebelled against the restrictions of her community. She travelled abroad and drank liquor. Even if the community fined her for these transgressions, she committed the offences again because she believes she had a mind of her own. Laxmi believes that she swam against two currents – one society and the other, the hijra community. The transgender community of India is a minority section. Even if they are getting recognition by their literary works, education and social involvement, there is an immense need for their betterment. It is because they have always been seen as an outcast of society and their alienation has led to a collective trauma in the hijras. In his work “Hijra Autobiographies: Trauma, Discrimination and Social Exclusion in India”, Dr. V. Dwivedi notes the following:

Their everyday experience is filled with discrimination, shame and harassment leading to a strong rejection of their identity which further makes them extremely vulnerable to violence, sexual assault, molestation and rape as no cases are reported in police stations because of their silence against such happenings. Their enrolment in educational institutions is nearly zero and same is the case with their employment. They never avail essential services like health care due to fear of rejection and discrimination. Their access to public places, cinemas, malls, restaurants is very limited and the use of public toilets is a big problem as there are no separate toilets for the transgender community. (46)

Laxmi faced such atrocities all her life. Molestation and rapes began when she was too young to understand them. The first case of sexual exploitation happened when she was seven, “The pain was so excruciating I almost passed out”, by her own distant cousin. He repeatedly molested her. But Laxmi feels that these assaults transformed her. Laxmi says that maturity came to her at an abnormally early age, “when most boys still go about in shorts... I was not beyond my age and it was suffering that had made me so” (9). So, *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* chronicles the transition of a human being from being a man to living as a third gender.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* opines that gender is ‘performative’, meaning it is constructed through one’s actions, behavior and appearance. It applies completely in our study of Laxmi’s identity and the idea of gender formation in society. *Gender Trouble* was the most influential radical text of the 1990s and is canonical for understanding gender and queer theories and concepts. Judith says that gender is a “constructed identity, performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mood of belief” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179). The fact that Hijra community’s identity is performative, is proven in the fact that in sartorial terms, there is a drastic difference in Laxmi’s pictures before and after becoming a part of the Hijra community. The autobiography carries many pictures of her appearance.

Laxmi argues in her autobiography that the society supports and approves only heterosexist power. Other abnormalities are marginalized. Even in the dominant spheres of politics, society and economy, such powers are daily routines. Butler believes a need for loosening of these strict categories of gender – male and female – because this is where the problem lies. Power latches on to this compulsory heterosexuality and change would

be therapeutic for all the other genders. Throughout the narrative, one observes Laxmi articulate her women like choices and talking at length about her revolution of first, homosexuality and then finally, Hijra. In *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, Laxmi says that “to me, the term transgender means transcending gender” and not restricting the term gender to only the male and the female (179). It is Shabina, a transgender herself, who acquainted her with the history of Hijra system, their traditions, their lifestyle and their sources of income. She also explained Laxmi that “the hijras had virtually no support system to safeguard their interests. I begin to realize that hijras were a culturally rich subject. Not everyone could become a Hijra – it took guts” (39). “Guts” because to define sexual identity for a person who is confused about his or her sexuality, demands a lot of introspection and is subject to numerous social, familial and psychological threats and oppression. A hijra is neither male nor female. Laxmi says that, “she is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, but not a man either. A Hijra’s male body is a trap – not just to the Hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a Hijra to be a man” (40).

Laxmi clarifies in her autobiography that a person cannot be born a hijra, because a hijra is always born as a male. Though one can be born as a hermaphrodite, which means a person having both male and female organs at birth. So hijra is a psychological and a sexual term, not a biological term. Therefore, there is a conflict between their biological identities and their sexual identities. This conflict is borne out of their body language – typical gestures, non-normative mannerisms and movements and other expressions that all girlish. Apart from these, the social behaviours are also non-normative which include elaborate hairstyle, loud make up, jewellery and dresses. There is thus a feeling of gender entrapment in a wrong body (172). Despite being biological men, hijras perform behavior of women.

Judith Butler claims that everyday behavior, speech codes, dressing styles and actions mould one’s quintessential masculine or feminine identity. The gender is thence wholly a social matter and it is manifested in performance. Laxmi’s case provides again that if a person’s biological, social and physiological identities – merge and appear incongruous, the person is ostracized from society. Unaccountable people fall prey to social norms and undergo hormone therapies to hide their identities and live a life of lie. The only inkling Laxmi has is her emancipation in dancing, a role whose resemblance she found in being a drag queen. It is in being a drag queen that she took solace – putting on her favourite dark coloured lipstick – Personi 113, or growing long fingernails, or wearing small rings on various parts of her body, developing a devil may care attitude and wearing sexuality on her sleeve (Tripathi 30). This defined her identity. She boasts of her experience as a drag queen:

Artistic people are actually supposed to possess angularity that mark them out from the run of the mill. I, thus, I wanted to be open about my sexuality and assert my sexual difference. This, of course, was easier said than done, for though I was proud of my quirks, I was also in the need of social acceptance [...] I liked being a drag queen... I wanted to drape myself in a sari and where skirts every single day. (33)

Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* that drag queen demonstrates “the contingent dimensions of significant corporeality – anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance... In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitated structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (187). Drag queens imitate gender and Laxmi strengthens her place as a figure that is manipulated and negotiated by desires and freedom of expression, because as a drag, Laxmi gets an ability to perform whatever she desires, even if it is a hyper sexualized imitation of one’s specific gender. Laxmi realizes that power functions pervasive, live through the meanings of man and woman. Butler believes that “identity is not something planted in us to be discovered, but something that is performatively produced by acts that effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (180).

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi is therefore, a narrative of resistance. Laxmi resisted acts of sexual violence and rather threatened her perpetrators with consequences. She took active steps since childhood to discover and analyse the feelings she had which made her unique. In her life narrative, Laxmi had acquired the sense of reality that submissiveness and passivity would be her enemies, and that she will have to resist the gender stereotypes – “I discovered that passivity did not pay. It might endear me to society, but it came with a price. I decided at that moment to raise my voice against the things I did not like. Henceforth, I would not do anything against my will (8). She ventured out to meet the people who could help her and give her a sense of direction about her sexuality. She met Mr. Ashok Row Kavi, a social worker for the transgenders and felt relieved to learn that being effeminate is not shameful (10). Such introspections made her reclaim her true identity and she says, “I have always considered myself to be monarch of my own body” (35). When the celebrated writer Salman Rushdie met Lakshmi in Mumbai, this is how he describes his visit: “Lakshmi is a rarity among hijras, she lives at home, and, to avoid upsetting her parents, dresses as a man when she is with them. They call her by her male name, Laxmikant, or the nickname Raju, and, as a man, she works at home as Bharatanatyam teacher. But when she leaves home, she’s Laxmi, and everyone in Thane knows her. She is a voluptuous person with purple black lips, hard to miss. Her beginnings are not unusual” (209).

Laxmi reclaimed her identity as a margin very early in her life. Marginalization posed many riddle-like situations in her life. This arises the problem of identity assertion in the hijras. For the differently sexed sections, the aspect of identity is very sensitive, pressing and pertinent. Laxmi attended activist meetings internationally and visited every meeting, national or international, where she was heard and could create

awareness. On multiple occasions, she visited Amsterdam, New York and Bangkok. She was welcomed in literary circles and together with her trans-persons group of Kate Borsten, Stephen Whittle and Andrew Hunter (qtd. in Anita 57). Laxmi represented Indian hijra culture internationally. And her fame and activism helped her immensely at personal level, and at a socio- communal level, the Hijra community got awareness. While she often transgressed against the reputation of her community and refused to obey the codes imposed on Hijras, she justified them owing to the travel abroad and press interview needs. By shunning the inhibitions and voicing out her identity and that of her community, she has stirred up an awareness in the literary and academic circles of India. She founded Maharashtra Tertiya Panth Sanghatan and has successfully sensitized Indian society, government and the legal system. Owing to her efforts, the national government has included policies for the transwomen.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

CONCLUSION

Laxmi Tripathi is clear and proud about her sexuality since an early age. In *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, she proudly flaunts the status of 'Madonnas of sexuality' in school (16), her comfort in effeminate attributes and her realization that "in order to be respected by others, one had to first respect oneself. It seems to me that a lot of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people don't know this" (25). Like Judith Butler, even Laxmi hopes for a feminism that surpasses exclusive gender norm and rigid portrayal of acceptable identities in society. Butler believes that "anatomical differences can be experienced only through the categories and expectations set out by culture's signifying order" (qtd. in Leitch 2485). In *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*, Laxmi also recounts the problems of "compulsory heterosexuality", a term that Butler borrowed from Adrienne Rich (2485). Laxmi says that even many feminists promote heterosexuality which indirectly hint at their biasedness against other forms of sexualities. A person who 'feels like a woman' can never truly feel what being a woman is, they believe – "it is only a woman who knows what the female body is, and it is only a woman who can conceive and give birth to a child" (Tripathi 180). Her autobiography ends with this line, giving the society the realization that a lot still needs to be done in the bringing hijras and transgenders at par with the other genders.

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