

BEING HIJRA: A STIGMA A PERUSAL TO A.REVATHI: THE TRUTH ABOUT ME(A HIJRA LIFE STORY)

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ABSTRACT

Transgender people are those who have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their assigned sex. Transgender is also an umbrella term: in addition to including people whose gender identity is opposite of their assigned sex (Tran's men and Trans women). Being transgender is independent of sexual orientation. The degree to which individual feel genuine, authentic and comfortable with their external appearance and accept their genuine identity has been called transgender congruence.

Most transgender people face discrimination in the workplace and in accessing public accommodation and healthcare. In many places, they are not legally protected from discrimination.

*This paper proposes to study the process and effect of heteronormative gender colonization that the Hijra community of India witness, by taking into account the autobiography of A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. The autobiography "is the first of its kind in English from a member of the Hijra community" and it clearly shows how the Hijra community of India suffers lingual, sartorial and economic colonization at the hands of this heteronormative society. It is a travelogue of travails but the intention of the author is not to "seek sympathy from society or government", but rather to make this heteronormative society aware of the fact that the Hijras are also human— Hijras also have feelings, they too want to be loved and accepted, they too want to live.*

KEYWORDS: *Hijra, Suppression, Torture, Man or Woman, Discrimination*

INTRODUCTION

Revathi is a Writer, actor, and activist based in Bangalore. She works with Sanagama, A sexually minorities human rights organization for individuals oppressed due to their sexual preference. She is the author of UnarvumUruvum and her autobiography, *The Truth about me*, is the first of its kind in English from a member of the hijra community. She cites a very prominent Tamil Dalit writer Bamaas one of her main inspirations. She is one of the first members of the Hijra community to write a book. Her works have been translated in more than 8 languages and acting as a primary resource on Gender Studies in Asia. Her book is a part of a research project for more than 100 universities.

Since Hijra's are signaled out as stigmatized persons and the society recognizes them to be socially and biologically incapable of performing the expected roles of the male or female gender. They, therefore are not accepted as part of the mainstream and thus left to lead a life of their own.

In our society, we speak the language of rights loud and often. But do the marginalized really have access to these rights? Individuals are denied their rights in the name of sex, sexuality, caste, and religion. They have to either arrive at a compromise or engage in a struggle. I'm one such individual who has been marginalized because I was born a male and wanted to live my life as a woman. *The Truth about Meis* about my everyday experience of discrimination, ridicule, and pain; it is also about my endurance and my joys.

This paper therefore, proposes to analyse the multilayered process of gender colonization that the Hijra community of India endures, by taking into account the travelogues of travails of A. Revathi. The autobiography begins with a Preface, where A. Revathi clearly mentions the intention behind writing this book:

“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 aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of Hijras, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires [...] I hope now that by publishing my life story, larger changes can be achieved. I hope this book of mine will make people see that Hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the rights to live in this society.”

Born as the youngest male sibling in the family of three brothers and a sister, A. Revathi was initially baptized as Doraisamy. Now, while referring to Revathi's earlier childhood phase as Doraisamy, one gets perplexed when it comes to the choice of pronouns— whether to use “he”/ “she”, “his”/ “her”— because in the binary system of language there is no pronoun as such to cater to the need of the so-called third gender or the transgender.

This absence of pronoun signifies the fact that the transgender has only an epistemological existence without any ontological existence. And this absence of ontological existence is one of the main reasons of their being ostracised and colonized by the heteronormative society.

“They would chant, Girl-boy! Ali’! Number9’! my heart would sink at these words, but I also felt faintly gratified and even happy that these boys actually conceded that I was somehow a woman.”

Revathi was born as Doraiswamy, a male in a peasant family in Tamil Nadu. Right from her childhood, she experienced violence in her school and her family for her 'feminine' ways. As a child, she didn't like playing with boys and preferred playing with young girls and dressing up as a woman in her mother's clothes. Throughout her childhood, she also felt a deep unease of belonging to a wrong body. As a young Doraiswamy, Revathi went through immense mental turmoil and confusion over his gender identity.

However, when she first met a group of people from the kothi community during a school trip to Nammakal, she felt a sense of kinship and decided to run away from her hometown in Salem to Delhi with them so that she could be true to her gender identity. In Delhi, she started living with the Hijra community. It was during this phase that she underwent a sex-change operation. Post her operation, she was rechristened as Revathi by her guru.

While she was unable to express herself freely, she had to undergo physical and sexual violence coupled with economic hardship. She had to resort to several odd jobs to survive including dancing at weddings, begging and sex work. After some months, tired of her life in Delhi, she ran away and went back home, where she wasn't made to feel welcome. She endured taunts and insults but did not take it lying down. She subsequently left her home in Tamil Nadu and moved to Bangalore for work. While she initially took to sex work, she finally got a job at Sangama, an NGO working for the

rights of sexual minorities. Here, she was exposed to activist meetings, learned more about her rights among many other things. While she started off as a peon in the organization, she rose in the rungs and finally ended up as the director.

Doraisamy, being born with the body of a male was expected to behave like a male by the heteronormative society. But Doraisamy's male body nurtured the desires and passions of being a female. He/ she (?) always felt that a woman is trapped within 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 in the autobiography narrates multiple incidences to show how passionately Doraisamy wanted to dress like a woman and how he/she (?) enjoyed playing the role of female characters on stage during the school annual day celebration or how he/she (?) enjoyed putting on the "Female disguise" during the celebration of the Mariamman festival in their village.

"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[...]" (4) "In class, I would sit staring at the girls, taking note of the way their braids fell, the intricate knot of their colorful ribbons, the jasmine, and kanakambaram they wore in their hair, and their skirts and blouses. I longed to be like them and suffered that I could not dress so."

"I Played Chandramathi in Harishchandra I Think I did this Exceptionally well Because Everyone Praised Me Saying that I looked and Acted Like a Real Woman. This Pleased Me Very Much."

"In my kurathi's garb, I could express all those female feelings that I usually have to suppress and so felt happy. I had not worn a disguise I said to myself; I had has given form to my real feelings."thus, dress being one of the major and perhaps the most important marker of heteronormative gender distinction, "cross-dressing" or transvestism is regarded as the primary source of desire fulfillment by the transgender community. When Doraiswamy for the first time came to know about the existence of people like him/her (?), the first and the foremost emphasis was on the fact that they "wore saris" and then the focus was on the fact that they had "an operation".

This emphasis on the gender-specific dressing pattern suggests how subtly through the binary sense of dressing pattern, the heteronormative society actually creates a hegemonic discourse to strengthen its colonizing process over the marginalized third gender community. The third gender as such does not have any specific set of dressing pattern. So during the initial years of his/her (?) life, the transgender people cannot help but oscillate between the male and female dressing pattern and thereby unavoidably conforms themselves within either of the two socially approved gender category. And it is this forceful unavoidable submission of the third gender to the "grand narrative" of heteronormative dress code which speaks volumes about their colonized state.

Even within the hijra community itself, the dress code is not just so innocent. It is highly emblazoned with motifs of hierarchy and power game. The elders of the hijra community when accept a newcomer like Doraiswamy for the first time as a chela, it is a compulsion "that a feminine man offers respect to the sari-clad and earns their goodwill ". So, the "sari-clad" women within the hijra community enjoy a special status of respect. Revathi while narrating in details the customs and rules of the hijra community also refer to the importance of dress to earn respect: If born a pottai, and when

living amongst pottais, it is important that a person pierces her ears and nose, 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 Gender Geometry: A Study of A. Revathi's Autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* 130 man crossing your path, you are expected to make way for him, bend your head bashfully and make sure that your chest is covered.

Thus even if it is accepted that hijras are neither wholly male nor wholly female in the strict sense of the term,— (though the notion of the possibility of being “wholly” male or female is now contested)— but it is a compulsion that they must put on dress that signifies a homogeneous gender identity. Strangely enough, heterogeneity or fluid gender identity is not entertained even within a community which is necessarily heterogeneous in nature. This is perhaps the result of sartorial colonization, and it is high time that this colonized state be addressed and thus reformed to free the third gender from another clutch of heteronormative gender colonization.

Added to lingual and sartorial colonization, the transgender community is miserably colonized economically. In India, the most common sight of a hijra is to see them either begging in a marketplace or in a railway station or to see them in groups going for “doli-baddai”: Hijras play dholak, sing, and dance, and this is called doli-badhai. They do this at weddings and during childbirth. People give them what they can afford --- rice, wheat, a sari. Hijras find out where there has been a birth and send word to the family, saying that they would arrive on a such-and-such day to bless the newborn and they must be given baddai [...] Similarly, hijras go to marriage halls and sing and dance, teasing the groom and bride, which pleases them, and they too give money.

Now, one would very easily get tempted to accuse and blame the hijra community for choosing the life of a beggar, but does one ever acknowledge the truth that a Hijra is never allowed to enter the mainstream economy in whatever form it may be? Such is the social stigma that a hijra can never be accommodated within an economic circle which would promote their economic independence. It is not that they are inefficient to carry out jobs other than begging and sex work, but the otherization is due to the fact of their being the third gender! Heteronormative society is tactful enough in perpetuating its hegemonic gender discourse. Why is it that we don't find any shop where a hijra is its owner or if not an owner at least an attendant? Have we ever met any hijra taxi/ auto/ bus driver? Sadly enough the answer is a big NO! If this is the scenario of private entrepreneurship, can one expect a different scenario in the government sector or in academics.

Let us start from analyzing the very first step that one needs to follow before getting a job: filling in of the application form. In India the application form for any government jobs necessarily maintain a column specifying the gender of the applicant, but that specification is clearly stated to be either a male or a female so at the very beginning it is assumed that there cannot be any eligible candidate contesting for the job whose gender preference is different from that of a male or a female. This very negation of allowing the Hijra community to take part in productive economic output makes them all the more an object of rejection and derision. Though there is now an option of ‘others’ also but it still not that effective.

The tragic part of the story is that it is society who denies them entry into main-stream productive economy, and it is society itself who curses them for living a parasitic life! The hijra community in India is thus enmeshed in the mire of lingual, sartorial and economic colonization. And it is A. Revathi who through his/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 “stared at” and “laughed at” but rather considered as a human being: Men and even women stared at us and laughed, and heckled us. I realized what a burden a hijra’s daily life is.

Do people harass those who are men and women when they go out with their families? Why, a crippled person, a blind person— even attract pity and people help them. If someone has experienced physical hurt, they are cared for both by family and by outsiders who come to know of it. But we —we do not consider human.” How long will this so-called tolerant progressive society take only to accept the hijras as human beings who feel — a person who wants to be loved and accepted, a person who wants to live? Cannot this heteronormative society allow an individual to live a life of dignity only because he/ she (?) do not fit into the existing gender geometry? Can we not hope to draw a new figure of gender geometry? Hopefully, we can!

“All I ask is that you accept as worthy of respect what you’ve all along considered unnatural and illegal. We want to live as women and if we are granted the facilities that will enable us to do so, we will live as other women do,”

Recently law has been declared on 6 Sept 2018, the supreme court of India decriminalized homosexuality by declaring section 377 of the Indian Penal Code unconstitutional. The court unanimously ruled that individual autonomy, intimacy, and identity are protected fundamental rights.

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