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DECONSTRUCTING PATRIARCHAL HETERONORMATIVITY THROUGH SELF-
NARRATIVE: A STUDY OF LAXMINARAYAN TRIPATHI'S *ME HIJRA, ME LAXMI*

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of hijra narratives in Indian literature is a recent phenomenon. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* is an autobiography by Laxminarayan Tripathi, a transgender activist born in 1979. Translated from Marathi into English, the autobiography provides a poignant narrative of a transgender individual who endured numerous adversities but ultimately resolved to live life with a positive outlook. His/her objective is to effect positive change in society by facilitating the integration of transgender individuals into public and private sector employment, thereby enabling them to acquire dignity and respect. The current paper examines the self-narrative of transgender writer Laxminarayan Tripathi in the context of gender performativity and physical identity. The objective of this paper is to assess Laxmi's traumatic yet inspiring journey from an anguished existence to the acquisition of a boisterous, appealing, and convincing transgender voice. This article emphasizes the significance of listening to the stories of transgender individuals with a broader perspective, as hijras, who are essentially human beings, face social exclusion, widespread stigma, discrimination, and multiple oppressions due to the prevalent gender binary in our society. The self-narrative by Laxmi examines a number of unexamined, unmasked, and masked questions related to sexuality and gender formation in culture. This article highlights that by problematizing the given categories of male and female sexualities and the following gender roles in society, the narrative of Laxmi deconstructs the entire structure of patriarchal heteronormativity, in which hijra identity is stigmatized.

Keywords: autobiography, self-narrative, hijra, exclusion, Laxminarayan Tripathi, subalternity, heteronormative.

The third gender community in India, the hijra community, continues to face discrimination and marginalization in the politics of gender and sexuality in the country. Despite legal recognition by the Supreme Court of India in 2014, the hijra community lacks social acceptance and faces difficulty in social activities and group interactions. The politics of gender and sexuality in India are based on the notions of the 'normative' and

'alternative', making alternative identities invisible. Laxminarayan Tripathi's autobiography, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, challenges these stereotypes and dismantles the normative discourse of gender identity. Spread into twenty-one chapters, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* is a life narrative of Laxminarayan Tripathi, alias Laxmi, a Thane, Mumbai, Maharashtra-based male who later turns into a female and becomes a hijra. Tripathi dedicates her autobiography to her parents, showcasing her better-off and more graceful life despite being transgender.

According to Laxmi, "The word 'hijra' is a term of abuse. Its variants in colloquial language include 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" (171). For Laxmi, a hijra is a social construct because one is not born a hijra but becomes a hijra. A hijra is always born male and later develops psychological and sexual traits of the female gender. Thus, the hijras undergo a conflict between their biological, psychological, and sexual identities borne out of their body language, which imitates girls rather than boys. They experience a feeling of entrapment, being caged in the wrong body. The book's narrative explores various stages of the life of the narrator-protagonist Laxmi: childhood, adulthood, her vocation as a dancer and conversion to the hijra clan, her life as a hijra and LGBT activist, and above all, her identity construction as the Third Gender-Hijra. In doing so, different psychosexual weaves of Laxmi's life get unknotted before the reader. The constant conflict between her sexuality and personality entangles the psycho-sexual dimension of her identity. The narrative opens up in Laxmi's childhood and ends with her celebration of hijrahood in the present, yet she feels nostalgic about childhood, though it is not filled with sweet memories.

Born into a middle-class family in Thane, Mumbai, Laxminarayan Chandradev Tripathi, a Brahmin by caste, began to develop an awareness of his distinct self and body as early as his childhood, around the age of seven. Laxminarayan is the family's eldest son, the elder brother of Shashinarayan, and the younger brother of a sister whose name is not mentioned in the narrative. Fraught with all types of illnesses in his childhood, Laxminarayan develops a love for dance, which is considered to be 'womanly pursuit' in 'patriarchal misogynistic cultures such as ours' (4). Laxminarayan, referred to as a homo and a *chakka* due to his feminine body language during his childhood, led a solitary life. He says, "I was a man, my body language was that of a woman.... My mannerisms, my walking and talking style were all feminine" (4). Because of his feminine mannerism, Laxminarayan very often becomes a victim of male sexual gaze and lust. At the age of seven, a distant cousin and his friends subject him to his first sexual abuse at a family function, initiating an indescribable cycle of physical and mental torture. This sexual abuse continues when he is repeatedly molested by his brother Shashi's friends and other people. At one point, he luckily avoids gang rape. The narrator, Laxmi/Narayan, says, "My body was a playhouse and a plaything, and any man could do anything with it" (27).

It is through suffering that Laxminarayan gains maturity, as he discovers: "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" (8). This raising of voice leads Laxminarayan to two things: making choices of his own and accepting his new transgender-hijra identity. Laxminarayan finds his attraction to boys puzzling, given that, in our heteronormative society, a boy should naturally gravitate towards girls. Grappling with his different sexual orientation, Laxminarayan meets the renowned LGBT rights activist Ashok Row Kavi to develop an understanding of self and body. It is Ashok Row Kavi who consoles Laxminarayan and makes him accept his queer sexuality as normal. Addressing Laxminarayan, he says, "No, my child, you are not abnormal. You are absolutely normal. What is abnormal is the world around us. They simply don't understand us" (11).

After this meeting, Laxminarayan starts accepting himself as gay and not abnormal. The narrative is abundant with Laxminarayan's sexual attraction to a number of boys. He finds some of these affairs 'rejuvenating' (14) and enters into sexual relationships with some of his new 'yaar' of his own choice. Laxmi, in her narrative, contemplates the transformation she underwent when she was Laxminarayan, a boy. There has been a constant struggle between a biological boy and a psychological girl inhabiting the same body. When attached to a man, Laxminarayan thinks of himself as a woman, not a man. Laxminarayan succinctly describes her struggle with the male body experience, asking, "But then, what was going on inside my body?"

Though I was born as 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?" (22).

Laxmi's entire narration takes into account the ideas of gender performativity (to use Judith Butler's phrase) and sexual orientation as they appear in heteronormative cultures like ours. In a patriarchal heteronormative society, sex is always already gendered. The fundamental idea of 'gender performativity' posits that 'gender' emerges from the repeated expression of gender, lacking a stable, cohesive gender identity. It is an imitation or miming of the dominant gender conventions. Butler claims that "the act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene" (Butler 1988: 526). In an interview with Liz Kotz, Butler argues, "I think for a woman to identify as a woman is a culturally enforced effect. I don't think that it's a given that on the basis of a given anatomy, an identification will follow. I think that 'coherent identification' has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced; and that the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame" (Kotz 1992: 88). Because sex is inherently gendered, society expects Laxmi to embody a masculine role. Her parents expect her not to be Laxmi but only Laxminarayan, treat him as their eldest son, and want him to marry a girl and have children.

The narrative shows Laxmi's struggle to be a part of two worlds: the familial world of parents and siblings and the public world of hijras. Laxmi's meeting with Lawrence Francis, alias Shabina, a hijra, later opens up the doors of an altogether new world of hijra clan. She gets acquainted with the Hijra community, their history, traditions, lifestyles, and source of income. Her acceptance of hijra identity, without revealing it to the family members in the beginning, is rebellious in itself, as it disrupts the patriarchal idea of identity formation on the basis of anatomy. Laxmi calls hijras a culturally rich sub-sect and proudly says, 'Not everyone could become a hijra—it took guts' (39). Etymologically, the word 'hij,' as Laxmi explains, "refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called 'hijra'... God loves the hijra community and has created a special place for it outside the man-woman frame. A hijra is neither a man nor a woman. 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" (39–40). Thus, Laxmi in the narrative sheds light on many biases and cultural misconceptions that prevail in our society about hijra identity.

Laxmi, in her narrative, shows the basic difference between Indian hijra and foreign transgenders. In India, hijras live in extremely poor conditions. They suffer from socio-economic poverty and estrangement. Laxmi, ironically, says: "Except for the newly introduced Aadhaar Card, we have no *aadhaar* or official recognition....We are Thus, destitute. Estranged from family and ostracized by society, people couldn't care less how we earn a livelihood, or where our meal comes from" (155). The basic difference between Indian hijras and foreign transgenders is that "in India, becoming a hijra is a spiritual process; here, it is clinical, involving counselling, surgery, and hormonal therapy. After that, the person concerned goes about his/her business as if nothing has happened" (88). Unlike hijras in Inida, transmen and transwomen do not live in ghettos. Hijra 'gharana' and 'parivar' are unique to India. The narrative presents a few transgender individuals from the west, illustrating their integration into mainstream society, which contrasts with the experiences of Indian hijras. To alleviate the conditions of hijras, to raise voice against discrimination against transgender, and to raise socio-cultural awareness about the hijra subject and subjectivity, Laxmi sets up her own NGO, 'Astitva'.

Laxmi is a unique example of both 'hijra-activist' and 'hijra celebrity.' Laxmi, in her narrative, is quite aware of her celebrity status, which is not always celebrated by the Hijra clan, especially by her guru. Her visibility and celebritization of her hijra self in public come under scanner, and she becomes vulnerable. Lataguru's disapproval of Laxmi's self-fashioning as a voice of the community in popular media is an example of how Laxmi as a hijra-activist is viewed within the traditional set of hijra *gharana*. Her modernizing efforts are sometimes viewed suspiciously. The conservatism of hijra nayaks (leaders) is evident when they arbitrate against the use of condoms by hijras, arguing that condoms deter clients. While Laxmi, with her liberal, modern, individual lifestyle, subverts essentialist binaries of gender and negates the patriarchal, heteronormative world view, the hijra clan

conforms to its own hierarchies. Though Laxmi underscores certain hijra rules in the narrative, she largely critically evaluates the hijra social structure. She writes: "We hijras virtually have a parallel social structure. There are seven hijra gharanas... It is a vast extended family" (174). Laxmi's staying with her family is sharply viewed by Lataguru: "[W]hy must you cling on to the male-female society?" (72). Laxmi, defying Lataguru's dictates, clings to her family ties and celebrates the support of her family, especially her father, at the show *Such Ka Samna*, where her father asks, "Why should I expel Laxmi from the family? I am his father, he is my responsibility" (123).

In the narrative, Laxmi fights against two different currents: mainstream society and the hijra community. Laxmi is a real "deconstructive angel," always at the forefront of demolishing all hierarchical structures. She describes her rebellion against the Hijra community as follows:

I observed all the rules because the decision to become a hijra was, after all mine. But soon there came a time when I rebelled. I could not stand the restrictions on my freedom. I began to give interviews to the media. I appeared on television. I travelled abroad. I drank liquor. The community fined me for these transgressions. I paid the fine and committed the 'offences' again. I was all ostracized by the community. But my chelas stood by me. They were proud of me because I was educated and had a mind of my own. So what if I broke all the rules? (160)

Laxmi uses her hijrahood to spread social awareness about the hijra community. She uses social activism to "make the viewers aware that hijras are normal people, just like them" (125).

Laxmi experiences tremendous psychological pressure during this time, as proving herself a hijra becomes a challenging task for her. After a tumultuous journey, she finally receives a certificate from a doctor stating that, despite not being castrated, Laxmi qualifies as a hijra from a psychological perspective. While many, including hijras, believe that castrated males are real hijras, Laxmi has never subscribed to the view that a person's biology determines gender. Laxmi's understanding of transgenderism later gets legal approval when the Supreme Court of India, in its seminal declaration about transgender people, states that the 'Psychological Test' to be conducted as opposed to the 'Biological Test' to determine the third gender of a person and also that insisting on Sex Reassignment Surgery as a condition for changing one's gender is illegal.

In Urdu, Telugu, and Tamil, the hijras are known as *khwaja sara*, *napunsakudu*, and *aravani*, respectively, drawing inspiration from the well-known Mahabharata story of Lord Krishna and Aravan. Laxmi deconstructs sex and gender ties in the patriarchal world and investigates different sex-gender affiliations in hijras. Laxmi states:

Hijras are born as male children biologically. Psychologically, however, they feel they are female. Sexually, they are attracted not to the opposite sex but to their own sex. This conflict between their biological, psychological, and sexual identities is borne out by their body language-their gestures, mannerisms, movements, and expressions all belong to girls rather than boys. Their social behaviour, which includes dress, hairstyle, make-up, jewellery, etc., is also that of women. Thus, there's a feeling of entrapment, of being jailed in the wrong body. (172)

Transgender individuals have faced oppression in heteronormative cultures since ancient times. However, they have made significant progress by writing and expressing themselves in their bodies, gaining a voice to interact with conventional societal structures, and establishing body politics. Laxmi in *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* makes a journey from Laxminaryan Tripathi (a biological male) to Laxmi (conversion into a hijra clan) and very boldly accepts her third gender identity, the identity that she and other hijra activists later legally win and adopt from the court of law. Laxmi, a prominent activist for the LGBT community, fought tirelessly for the dignity of transgender individuals. Her autobiography, "Me Hijra, Me Laxmi," is a landmark work in "Hijra Literature," showcasing her life's challenges and her dedication to advocating for the "hijras," a group of individuals often overlooked in mainstream literature.

Laxmi's autobiographical account, in fact, reveals the sexual and gendered subalternity faced by the hijras in the patriarchal, heteronormative world. The entry of a hijra narrative into the field of mainstream autobiographical writings should be seen as a challenge posed to the epistemological and aesthetic structure of

mainstream autobiographies, including women's autobiographies. Though Laxmi's narrative cannot or should not be taken as a representative narrative of the entire Hijra community, universalizing their experiences, there are certain meeting points that can be read as common Hijra experiences. Like Laxmi, every hijra experiences the plight of becoming aware of a body that cannot accommodate their psychosexual orientations.

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