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BEYOND VICTIMHOOD: THE THIRD GENDER CHALLENGE TO HETERONORMATIVITY IN A. REVATHI'S *THE TRUTH ABOUT ME*

Dr. Asit Panda
Associate Professor, Department of English, Belda College, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, India
E-mail: asitpanda23@rediffmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interplay between victimisation and identity formation in A. Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. Through narrative analysis, the study investigates how Revathi's personal narrative challenges heteronormative constructs and highlights the unique experiences of the hijra community in India. By documenting her journey from childhood struggles with gender identity to her attainment of her true self through transformation, and eventual acceptance and activism, Revathi's autobiography serves as both a personal testament and a social critique. This article argues that her narrative not only foregrounds the pervasive discrimination and marginalisation faced by hijras but also underscores the resilience and agency inherent in their quest for identity. By situating her story within the broader context of third gender discourses, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how autobiographical writing can serve as a powerful tool for social change and the affirmation of non-normative identities.

Keywords: Heteronormativity, Transgender, A. Revathi, The Truth about My Life, Hijra Autobiography, Discrimination.

Indian society, in accordance with long-standing customs, has endorsed practices and establishments that prioritise or esteem heterosexuality, heterosexual partnerships, and conventional gender roles, which are ascribed to individuals solely based on their biological characteristics. Society reacts with anger and disdain to any violation of the established sexual norms and practices dictated by traditions and customs. In this context, Nivedita Menon correctly contends, "Section 377 penalizes sexual activity 'against the order of nature'. The assumption is that 'normal' sexual behaviour springs from nature, and that it has nothing to do with culture or history or human choices" (Menon 93). The heteronormative patriarchal structure of Indian society is unable to account for the diverse sexual orientations of individuals. Society tends to disregard individuals with unique sexual orientations,

particularly those who identify as transgender or third gender. The society's prejudices and preconceived conceptions regarding non-heterosexuals or hijras, particularly transgender individuals, have resulted in the deprivation of many of their rights, privileges, and dignity as human beings in a civilised society. As a result of the gender binary that exists in our society, the hijras have been subjected to social exclusion, pervasive stigma, discrimination, and multiple oppressions.

Nevertheless, in recent years, a significant number of hijras or third genders have been making efforts to transcend this oppressive gender binary through self-enterprise. They have expressed their dissatisfaction with the heteronormative structure of society, which has resulted in their exploitation, humiliation, and dehumanisation. The third genders are engaged in an unwavering struggle to establish their identity and gain social acceptability. Mousim Mondal has correctly identified that "one of the grass root level struggle of the transgender community is the struggle for a dignified social recognition of the transgender community as an independent existing gender category. And that dignified social recognition can only be achieved if language is newly constructed and framed so as to incorporate the existence of third gender as a normal, socially approved, dignified gender category" (Mondal 126).

As Stephen Whittle in the Foreword to *The Transgender Reader* points out: "Trans identities were one of the most written about subjects of the late twentieth century" (Whittle xi). In India, many third genders or hijras are turning to autobiographical writing as a means of expressing their afflictions and rebelling against the conventional notions of gender roles and sexuality. The introduction of hijra narratives to the Indian literary landscape is a relatively recent development. The significance of listening to these accounts with a broader understanding of the subject is underscored by several recent critical interventions in the field of transgenderism. The self-narratives of hijras investigate a variety of unexamined, unasked, and masked concerns concerning the formation of gender and sexuality in culture. A. Revathi, a transgender writer, actress, and activist based in Bangalore, has authored an inspiring autobiography titled *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*. The self-narrative of Revathi deconstructs the entire structure of patriarchal heteronormativity, which stigmatises hijra identity, by problematizing the assigned categories of male and female sexualities and the subsequent gender roles in society. Revathi's self-narrative not only addresses the various challenges related to transgenderism and the struggles of living as a hijra in a society that adheres to heteronormative norms, but also exposes the hardships faced by a hijra in their quest to establish a new identity, thereby dismantling their previous self. The objective of this study is to elucidate the manner in which Revathi employs her self-narrative to portray the pervasive discrimination and marginalisation she experiences in our society, as well as her resolution and defiance of social taboos in her pursuit of a new identity.

A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, originally published in Tamil as *Unarvum Uruvamum* and translated into English by V. Geetha, reveals the hidden aspects of transgender struggles within Indian culture. The author has conducted a comprehensive examination of transgender association and has endeavoured to identify the challenges that hijras have surmounted. *The Truth About Me* is potentially the first hijra autobiography to be written in any Indian language, including English. The autobiography inaugurates the whole genre of hijra autobiography in Indian literary tradition. Spread into 29 chapters, the narrative of the autobiography encompasses the life of Doraisamy - an effeminate boy who later chooses to be a hijra and becomes Revathi - a transgender and subaltern activist. The narrative of the autobiography deliberately does not mention the name of the village and the names of the parents and other people related with the life of Doraisamy or Revathi - the protagonist and narrator. Revathi hails from a village of Namakkal taluka which falls in Salem district of Tamil Nadu. One of the reasons of not mentioning the names of the village and family members is not to put the associated people in any kind of troubles and to keep the narrative as much as personal and self-centered as it is also one of the demands of the genre of autobiography. By not naming certain people associated with her, Revathi in her narrative saves them from feeling any kind

of awkward situation in their lives for their being associated with her either as a father or a mother or a brother or a sister. The narrator's objective in the narrative is to focus on personal experiences of being a hijra in a heteronormative and patriarchal society of Tamil Nadu, India. The book's foreword clearly reveals A. Revathi's underlying reason for publishing this autobiography:

> 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 about 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 districts culture, and their dreams and desires. I hope now that by publishing my 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 the society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the right to live in this society. (Revathi v-vi)

Initially baptised as Doraisamy, A. Revathi was the youngest son in a family of six, which included his parents, three brothers, and one sister. As Atanu Samanta correctly claims,

> 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 have only an epistemological existence without any ontological existence. And this absence of ontological existence is one of the main reasons of their being otherwise and colonized by the heteronormative society. (221)

The protagonist-narrator Doraisamy alias Revathi in the very beginning of her autobiographical narrative brings forth her growing effeminate nature and the gender trouble she faces as a male child when she describes herself as a fifth standard boy who "played only girls' games" and "loved to sweep the front yard clean and draw the *kolam* every morning" and a boy who helped his mother "in the kitchen, sweeping and swabbing, washing vessel" (Revathi 3). Doraisamy experiences a sense of discomfort during his childhood as he attempts to reconcile the mismatch between his physical appearance and his internal aspirations and inherent abilities. She further narrates her growing effeminate nature and the gender trouble: "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" (Revathi, 4). People's calling Doraisamy 'Number 9', 'female thing', 'girl-boy' or sometimes 'female boy', in fact, does not hurt him as he 'wanted to be so' (Revathi 4). Street boys' pinching of his cheeks, kissing him and hugging him which in other terms can be seen as sexual assault is loved by Doraisamy because he imagines himself as a girl and feels gratified because as Revathi says: "I did now that I behaved like a girl, it felt natural for me to do so. I did not know to be like a boy..." (Revathi 7).

During her tenth grade, Doraisamy began to feel an increasingly strong and uncontrollable sense of femininity in her physical body and overall existence. Inside the sealed room of her sister's residence, she would dress up as a woman, drape her sister's saris, and emulate the mannerisms of any heroine. The only solace she could find was behind the closed doors and windows. She describes an occurrence in which she portrayed Chandramathi in the play "Harishchandra." She immerses herself in the character's life, as if she were a genuine woman acting. She exclusively portrayed female characters due to her inability to emulate a masculine counterpart. These were the sole instances in which she felt that she was being her authentic self.

The narrative of Revathi's autobiography constantly focuses on Revathi's perplexed relationship with her sexuality when she was a boy. Her perplexed sexuality invites thrashing from

brothers and father and scolding from mother. Grappling with her sexuality, she says: "I was a boy and yet I felt I could love other boys. Was this right or wrong? . . . I lived with these questions and doubts, which lay buried deep inside me" (Revathi, 9, 14), and this further leads her to what she calls "growing sense of irrepressible femaleness. . .. A woman trapped in man's body . . . a flawed being . . . obsessed, confused and anxious" (Revathi 14), when she enters class 10. In men's clothing, Revathi feels 'in disguise' and feels her 'real self behind' (Revathi 16). Revathi's ongoing struggle with her sexuality, harassment by men for her feminine attributes, and treatment as an object provide her with the opportunity to meet individuals who share her characteristics. Subsequently, she unexpectedly encounters Amma at Dindigul, who adopts her as her chela and bestows her with a new name. Consequently, Doraisamy is transformed into Revathi, after a Tamil heroine distinguished for her beauty.

In India, the heteronormative patriarchal family system initiates the development of sex/gender classifications throughout early childhood. Sex, which is determined at birth and remains consistent, influences the establishment and permanence of gender roles. Since Revathi's parents and older brothers have internalized the same cultural beliefs, Revathi is subjected to physical abuse by her family members. Due to their inability to comprehend Revathi's increasingly effeminate nature, they persistently subject her to torment. Upon her return home after running away, one of her brothers even strikes her with a cricket bat. When beaten heavily, even the mother says: "That's right. Beat him and break his bones. Only then will he stay at home and not run away" (Revathi 35). Revathi's head is completely shaved as a kind of punishment and as a religious offering to the goddess at Samayapuram temple to restore her to a state of normalcy. The continued physical mistreatment and humiliation she suffers as a result of her femininity becomes unbearable, compelling her to escape from her authoritarian family. During a critical moment in the story, when she reaches a state of desperation and wishes to end her miserable existence by taking her own life, her family members fail to offer assistance to prevent her from doing so. She was killed daily by the life she lived in the disguise of a male, rather than the oppression she endured. She merely desired to undergo a complete transformation into a woman, which was her true identity. Revathi embarks on a perilous endeavour by travelling to a different city with a distinct language and population. She steals her mother's gold earring and departs from her home. She exchanges it for a meagre sum of money in order to travel to Delhi.

The autobiographical narrative reveals Revathi's family members, especially her brothers' confrontation with her hijra identity. At the time of division of property, the brothers are of the opinion that a hijra is not entitled to have any property rights in family's properties. Revathi's brother says: "…. with you cock chopped off and still demand your share of property?" (Revathi 168). The very presence of Revathi in the house is troublesome for the brothers. It is Revathi's strong determination and awareness of hijra rights that make her demand her share of family property.

The narrative of the autobiography centres on Revathi's running away from house in her childhood as Doraisamy and then becoming a hijra by joining a hijra gharana and her experience of becoming a hijra in Indian society. Joining the hijra cult provides both social and economic security. Revathi ponders: "Marginalized by mainstream society, denied a legal existence and disposed of their rights, hijras turn to their community and its culture for comfort and nurture. In the hijra community there is no high or low – hijras do not observe caste or religious difference and there are hijras from both poor and rich homes" (Revathi 62). Becoming a hijra is a choice that Revathi makes to realize her third gender identity. She proudly says: "I AM NOT a man now. I am a woman, and I have a family with a mother, a grandmother, and sister-in- law" (Revathi 43).

Hijras in India function as social organization because with their unique religious rituals and rites, they form and function like a caste and a community with traditional occupations. Like other communities and castes, they too have hierarchies within them. The hijra households described in the

narratives of Revathi clearly show that the hijras have social organization with kinship ties and relationships that they form among them. Revathi becomes a member of hijra community at Mumbai when she joins her guru's mother's gharana as her chela. Describing the guru-chela relationship she says: "Among hijras, a guru is everything to a chela – she guides her at work, offers her a place to stay, she is with her in times of good and bad. A mother is different, for a hijra who is a daughter, the mother's home is like the natal home. The guru's home is like the marital home" (Revathi 59). Revathi's guru's home comprise *chelas*, *naathis* and *sadak-naathis* (daughters, granddaughters, great granddaughters). Nani's figure in the household is something that is feared, respected and worshipped.

The hijras of India are a religious community of men who are men but dress and act like women and whose religious faith centers on the goddess Bahuchara Mata. The hijras in India form a special caste group who form identification with the Mother Goddess or the female creative power embodied by the Mother Goddess. This characteristic of hijras makes them special in Indian context and makes them different from other transgender categories that exist in the west. Revathi in her self-narrative expresses this kind of identification with goddess both in the beginning when she has not yet joined the hijra cult, and at the end of the narrative when she has already joined the cult. In the beginning she prays to be one with the goddess: "Amma! Why must I suffer like this? Why must you put me through this ordeal? . . . I have known only pain. . .. It was you who made me male in form, but with female feelings. . .. By this day next year, you must make a woman of me, just like you, If you can't, at least make me into a man completely" (Revathi 57). Revathi in her narrative raises the issue of professions of hijras. As compared to mainstream genders, the hijras do not have many activities to do for their survival in the world in which they live. The most prestigious activity of the hijras is 'doli-badaai', i.e., to give 'badaai' on auspicious occasions like birth of a child (especially boy) and marriage. They sing and dance while playing the dholak. Badaai hijras do not get involved with sex work like other hijras. Other popular works of hijras include sex work, begging and working for elders at home.

With nirvana the impotent male persona dies and the new persona endowed with divine power emerges. The nirvana transforms impotent man into generative hijra. Only through nirvana experience, one can become a completely feminine. Revathi clears the importance of nirvana as a rite of passage to become a hijra: "I was eager to become a woman and that was all that matters to me . . . in order to turn femininity, all I needed to do was to get rid of this male object and I would become free to be a woman, like other women" (Revathi 66). In the entire self-narrative, Revathi deplores over the common people's attitude towards hijras. Hijras in India are the most abhorred community because common people cannot identify with their sex, i.e., either male or female. Within heteronormative society they are treated as aliens, criminals, subhuman and entirely detestable creatures. Revathi, thus, summarizes the overall attitude of people: "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 they attract pity and people help them. . . . we are not considered human" (Revathi 83).

Despite all suffering in life, Revathi's narrative celebrates Doraisamy's turning into Revathi after going through nirvana. Revathi, thus, celebrates turning into a woman: "It's not my vanity that made me cut it off! I felt like a woman – I wanted to stay true to my feelings, so I changed into a woman. And I'm going to live as one" (Revathi 114). The narrative gives detailed description of the rituals to be followed after nirvana operation. Revathi observes that after forty days of operation she receives feminine looks. The new birth as woman is celebrated by Revathi thus, "My face had changed! I felt like a flower that had just blossomed. It seemed to me that my earlier male form had disappeared and in its place was a woman. I felt exultant" (Revathi 88). The narrative clearly shows two different mental stages that Revathi passes through before and after nirvana. Nirvana brings in psychological relief in her life.

Revathi's becoming a woman after nirvana operation changes her psychological make up as she finds herself attracted towards men. The narrative succinctly captures twenty-year-old Revathi's growing bodily desire to have some man in life. The narrative shows that the desire becomes so acute that to satisfy her sexual hunger, she leaves her guru's home and joins other guru's house where sex work is done. Revathi in the narrative admits the dilemma: "I became a chela to my new guru because of my desire for sexual happiness, in order to fulfill my sexual longings" (Revathi 104), and moreover "I had not chosen sex work in order to make money. It was because I could not really repress my sexual feelings that I had opted for this life. I cried and confessed that I wanted to go home to my parents, that I could fall at their feet and beg to be taken back" (Revathi 110). Though she dislikes being ill-treated in this work, she continues it for some time till she returns to her home and later to her old guru.

Being compared with the life of an ascetic is perhaps the most earnest desire seen in many hijras. By achieving the state of nirvana, the hijras become ascetics. They literally leave their homes, material possessions, the social relations, caste, religion, male sexuality and become a part of hijra ascetic order. At one point in narrative, she expresses the paradox in life and her *trishanku* position: "Could not God have given me a woman's voice at least? When I was dressed like a man, they said I spoke like a woman, and now after I've changed into a woman, they say my voice is like a man's!" (Revathi 173). Like any common woman she too thinks of getting married and having children. She ponders: "Though I thought of myself as a woman, I felt that I was a man who had become a woman. Could I bear a child? Would I be able to marry? These questions bothered me and I felt them as so many insistent pinpricks" (Revathi 121). The narrative reveals Revathi's candid acceptance of her relationship with one cinema hall operator of nearby town and later her marriage with her colleague at Sangama - an NGO where she works. But such kind of relationship is seen as abnormal by her brothers who reprimands her: "We are men and we have married woman. We've made families. How can you claim to be a woman, you who have gone and chopped off your cock and worn a sari? Do you want to dishonor our name, the respect we enjoy?" (Revathi 185).

It has been rightly observed by Atanu Samanta that "[t]he hijra community in India is . . . 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" (223). The plight and afflictions that Revathi experienced as a hijra are boldly exposed in her self-narrative. Liberating her female soul trapped in a male body, Revathi challenges the taboos and numerous traditional beliefs that are linked to the third gender and are embedded in the societal mindset. Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury and Shreoshi Bhattacharjee have quite convincingly argued that "Revathi's irrepressible feminine desires were daring enough to voice against the subjugating forces of the society. She ridicules the cultures imposed upon the hijras and the demand for a legitimate behaviour. Revathi, through this stirring autobiography, questions 'gender performativity' that declares heteronormativity as normal" (04).

In conclusion, it may be argued that Revathi's autobiographical narrative, *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* offers ample opportunities to readers to theorize hijra self in patriarchal heteronormative Indian culture of our time in quite unconventional way, so that new diverse sexual identity of our time can be understood and accommodated in our culture. In India, dalits are stigmatized by their castes; the hijras by their sex and gender. But the self-narrative of Revathi demonstrates both stigmatization of hijras in Indian society and the volition to transcend the stigmatization by asserting individuality by carving economic and philosophical niche in existing hijra cultural structures. By refusing to be a part of the traditional occupational and hierarchical structures of hijra community, A. Revathi at the end of the narrative offers quite liberative and egalitarian hijra world view to the readers.

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