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GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN A. REVATHI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY "THE TRUTH  
ABOUT ME: A HIJRA LIFE STORY"

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a brief account of the consequences of gender colonization and wretched condition of hijra community in India. This autobiography shows how a hijra is deprived of all the facilities which a normal citizen of a country should have. Through this autobiography the author wanted to prove their existence as human beings, as well as he wanted to prove that they also have their opinions, thoughts, feelings and emotions about each and every aspect of society.

Key Words: Transgender, Gender Colonization, Heteronormative society.

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INTRODUCTION

'Hijra' is a term for a particular form of transgendered person, a "physiological male who adopts a feminine gender identity, women's clothing and other feminine gender roles." In India the hijra community is marginalized geographically, economically and socio-politically; hijras find it difficult to get employment, official recognition in their feminine identities, or protection from the various arms of the law and judiciary. Usually, generally, hijras live together in strict hierarchical familiar homes; they are most often self-employed in sex work, begging, and religious/ spiritual/ superstitious blessings (and curses). A hijra is not the same as transgendered male to female person, though obviously there is a room for develop.

This paper proposes to analyze the multilayered process of gender colonization that the 'hijra' community of India endures, by taking into account the travelogues of travails that A. Revathi presents in her autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* – the first of its kind in English from a member of the hijra community. 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 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)

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 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.

The story opens in small village in Tamil Nadu. Doraisamy was the youngest of five children – the fourth boy. He grew up shy, culturally effeminate, with an inclination to dress as a girl and do traditionally female activities around the house – the domestic chores, the games, the singing and dancing –

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 shy bride, my eyes to the ground, and everyone would laugh. No one thought much of it then, for I was little. (Revathi, 4)

As an indulged youngest child, this behaviour must at first have seemed merely precious. It was harder to ignore as he grew older; Doraisamy spends his childhood years with a growing unease as he tries to negotiate his body's incongruity with his inner desires and natural talents. In a family where every flaw is punished by physical violence one of Doraisamy's brothers has a penchant for beating him with cricket bats Doraisamy's dangers are not just about acceptance but also for his safety.

Doraisamy was confused with some questions and doubts, which lay buried inside him. He felt horribly shy, and whenever he saw young men, he automatically lowered his head. He felt drawn to them, but wondered if he should not be drawn to women instead, since he was a man. Days passed and he wondered when and if he would find answers, and if indeed he would find someone who understood what he felt –

Why did I love men? Was I mad? Was I the only one who felt this way? Or were there others like me, elsewhere in the world? Would I find them, if indeed they were there? (Revathi, 14)

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 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. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt shamed by this feeling. I wondered why God has chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why he could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. (Revathi, 15)

In his mid-teen he met a group of like-spirited men and he was wondering whether these men were perhaps like him, female inside and male outside. After meeting them he came to know about the hijra community and about "Danda" (which means sex). He desired to become a woman, marry an educated man and only then have sex. But his idea was completely changed when he was told that it was not all that easy to become a woman, only if he went to Mumbai or Delhi and stayed for years with those who wear saris and had undergone 'operations', could he hope to become one. He stole some money and earrings from her mother, and ran away from home and went to Delhi where his chosen "guru" ("teacher", here treated as mentor/ mother) lived and asked her to take him. He went through various rituals of the hijra community and became a "chela". His guru announced that he/ she (?) was her daughter and her new name is Revathi. From this time she was known as a woman in the hijra community. That day was very special to her, for the first time when she did a woman's work just as a woman would. But when her guru said her to go back home, she began to cry. She had known her only for day, but she felt towards her as she did towards her birth mother. Her work during that period was washing the clothes of the elders at home, fetching water, and helping with the shopping and cooking but after some days she began to dance at temple festivals in the nearby villages. At such moments, she felt despair, and wondered that people could be this way –

We got stared at a lot, and I heard people ask rather loudly whether we were men or women or Number 9s or devdasis. Some men made bold to touch us, on our waists or our shoulders. Some others pointed to our breasts and asked, 'Original' or 'duplicate'? (.....) God has made us this way, I thought, we have no work of our own; our parents do not understand us with distaste. Yet we too go hungry. Above all we wanted to live as human beings do, with dignity. (Revathi, 29)

In India, the transgender community is miserably colonized economically, the most common sight of a hijra is to see them either begging in a market place or in a railway station or to see them in groups going for "doli-baddai":

Hijras play the dholok, sing and dance, and this is called *doli-baddai*. They do this at weddings and during childbirth. People give them what they can afford – rice, wheat, a sari. hijras find out where there's a been a birth and send word to the family, saying that they would arrive on such-and-such day to bless the new born 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. (Revathi, 47)

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 main stream 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 this 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 government sector or in academic domain? Let us start from analyzing the very first step that one needs to follow before getting a job: filling in of 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. 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!

At the age of twenty Revathi decided to take up sex work in order to fulfill her sexual desires. This was the only way, at the time that she could come close to sexual satisfaction. But being a sex worker, and sexual minority, she only can get the wrong kind of attention. Revathi does mention that she had moments of happiness in her life, but details in dry terms the brutal facts of life as a hijra – the dangers, the assaults, and the rapes. Her tone while she describes the violence committed on her body – by clients, by random rowdies, by policemen – is one of matter of fact reportage. Revathi wants us to feel her pains and her sorrows, but her sufferings are not sensationalized; her dramatic moments are for her spiritual, emotional traumas.

Aside from the problems she has outside the hijra Houses and within – oppressive gurus, infighting with other hijras, battles with other Houses – Revathi maintains a fragile relationship with her family, whose acceptance of her new state is grudging at best. Aside from the tensions surrounding her gender identity, her family is involved in longstanding conflict over the parental property. To split it between three sons and one "daughter" is no laughing matter, especially when the daughter has so few avenues of income *and* is sensitive to rejection; let's not talk about the sons, one of whom is basically a terrible brother.

When Revathi finally moved to Bangalore, she found "daughters" of her own, three young people from educated, fairly well to do families. The difference between these three hijras and the others of Revathi's acquaintance are startling – they were not comfortable within the hijra Houses, requiring more freedom and space, they did not dress conservatively outside of sex work. Revathi sympathized with their desires, and gave

them the freedom they wanted and needed. One of these daughters was Famila – another recognizable name. Famila was a dynamic hijra-feminist-queer activist. She died in 2004. Though nominally under Revathi's care, it is Famila who drew her into the realm of social activism, by introducing her to Sangama. Revathi defied hijra custom by taking a paying job at Sangama, where she learned about her rights, about what could be done to educate other people about those rights. Sangama gave Revathi the language to express her dissatisfaction and her desires, her need for her hijra sisters as well as her discomfort within their confining homes. Revathi's narrative evolves through the book from the simple to the more sophisticated. While the prose never attempts artistic stylization, it is direct, heartfelt, and very honest. Within those boundaries of "plain prose" one sees the evolution of a Revathi whose thoughts and feelings grow clearer and attain more gravity. It's an interesting technique, all the more for being so understated.

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 "stared at" and "laughed" (83) but rather considered as a human being:

Men and even woman 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. If someone has experienced physical hurt, they are cared for both by the family and by the outsiders who come to know of it. But we – we are not considered human. (Revathi, 83)

It should not be recommend that *The Truth About Me* to someone looking for an easy read, nor is it perhaps the best book to know how they are deprived of the society, their hierarchies and the rituals – A. Revathi documents them as they affect her life, but her aim in her autobiography is to speak for herself, her life, sorrows and joys, not for the entire hijra community. At times the book is extremely uncomfortable, even distressing. But it is a direct, plainspoken narrative of the life of someone who lives on the margins, in the luminal spaces that we in the mainstream ignore, are uneducated about and are sometimes actively hostile towards. It's an engaging story of a woman who does not hide her flaws or her virtues, with clear sight and judgment of the world she lives in.

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