



Re-thinking Bodily Entrapment in Select Indian Trans Autobiographies

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to analyse two Indian trans autobiographies - *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi, a distinguished trans activist; and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a prominent Bharatnatyam dancer and trans activist. The autobiographical accounts critically explore the contribution of prevalent heteronormative ideologies to the marginalised status of transgender individuals in India. The narratives intricately depict the experiences of transgender individuals who grapple with a sense of mismatch between their assigned sex and psychological sexes, ultimately leading them to undergo Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) and related medical procedures. Drawing upon the perspectives of post-transsexual scholars such as Jacques Juliet, Janice Raymond, Jay Prosser, Kate Bornstein, and Sandy Stone, the study asserts that the transgender body is "programmed to disappear," promotes a "denial of mixture," and perpetuates the "purity" of gender after the corporeal transition. Furthermore, the paper examines how trans individuals incorporate established medical discourse on transsexuality into their autobiographies. The research findings underscore the need to develop a transgender discourse capable of offering a counter-discourse to the binary explanations of gender.

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Keywords: Transgender autobiographies, gender dysphoria, the wrong body, beyond-the-binary model, purity and denial of mixture, heteronormativity

Introduction

The present paper focuses on the genre of autobiography as employed by trans individuals in the Indian context. The study specifically examines two noteworthy Indian trans autobiographies- *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi; and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) by

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. The selected autobiographies elucidate the intricacies of identity formation and the challenges faced by trans authors within the heteronormative framework of society. The autobiographical accounts accentuate their childhood experiences, societal expectations and prejudice, and the internal struggles associated with understanding gender identity. However, the trans autobiographies also elucidate the influence of medical literature on transsexuals while describing the inner turmoil of being in a body that is not a true representation of their selves. The continuous use of the expression ‘wrong body’ becomes a subject of concern for various critics. Simultaneously, it reflects the prevalence of compulsory heterosexuality as a means to get inclusion into mainstream society.

Autobiography holds significant relevance within the realm of literary studies and serves a foundation for a variety of studies, including Transgender studies, African studies, Dalit studies, Women studies, American studies, and Black studies. This genre proves valuable due to its capacity to reflect an individual’s experience and vision in an exceptionally direct and authentic manner without rigid rules or patterns (Olney 16). The characterisation of autobiography as a “recollection of re-collection,” has facilitated individuals to interpret and articulate the narratives of their lives (Pascal 11). Transsexual individuals have globally embraced the genre of autobiography as a means to convey their real experiences as a marginalized sect within a heteronormative set-up. In India, the twenty-first century marked the flourishing of various trans autobiographies. *Unarvum Uruvamum (Our Lives, Our Words)*, the first trans narrative composed by A. Revathi in 2004, portrays the real-life experiences, poor economic status, vulnerability, and marginalisation of transgender individuals in India. With this concern, the current study aims to analyse the life experiences of A. Revathi, a distinguished trans activist, and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a prominent Bharatnatyam dancer and trans activist.

Revathi and Laxmi, born as Doraiswamy and Laxminarayan respectively, identify as transsexuals due to the continuous discomfort with the body they inhabit since childhood. While the terms transsexual and transgender are often employed interchangeably, they possess certain distinctions. Transsexuals or trans refers to people “who feel a strong desire to change their sexual morphology in order to live entirely as permanent, full-time members of the gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth” (Putzi 425). Transgender is an umbrella term for the identities exhibiting gender variance hence, it implies a “movement away from an assigned, unchosen gender position” (Stryker 38).

The close analysis of the select autobiographies by A. Revathi and Laxmi is grounded in the critical contributions made by gender theorists, notably Harry Benjamin, Sandy Stone, Janice Raymond, Jay Prosser, Kate Bornstein, Jacques Juliet and Susan Stryker. The autobiographical accounts counter and subvert established gender norms that are "normalised" by the heteronormative structure of society. The authors accentuate the biologically determined view in perpetuating the subjugation of trans individuals. Being 'culturally unintelligible' and positioned beyond the 'heterosexual matrix', transgender individuals encounter societal and familial oppression. Serena Nanda's seminal contribution *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1999), provides a comprehensive exploration of the social roles specifically *hijra* roles, followed by transgenders in India. Similarly, Gayatri Reddy's text *With Respect To Sex* (2005) delves into the lived conditions of transgender individuals in South India. The persistent feeling of being born in a 'wrong body' motivates transsexuals to seek alternations in the inhabited body through medical interventions. Within medical literature, the condition of feeling trapped or caged in the wrong body is identified as gender dysphoria. Advances in medical technology facilitate the reassignment or reconstruction of the desired sex, thereby encouraging individuals to undergo such procedures to align with the prevalent 'compulsory heterosexuality' in bipolar society. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that while it is medically possible to modify the assigned sex, addressing the psychological aspect of gender remains a more intricate challenge. So, the phrases such as 'wrong body' and not 'different body' became popular explanations for gender dysphoria. Harry Benjamin's seminal work *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966) meticulously examined the nuanced aspects of both childhood and adulthood in the life of a transsexual. The use of phrases like "trapped" and "wrong body" reflects the discernible influence of medical discourse on the narrative framework adopted by transsexuals. Furthermore, the pursuit of a desired body through medical interventions underscores the socially constructed nature of gender. Despite achieving the desired sex, transsexuals may still encounter challenges in aligning with the established norms of biological sex.

Janice Raymond, in the text *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of She-male* (1979) raised substantial concerns and provided critical insights regarding the language employed by transgender individuals to convey their experiences. Attaining a desired body through medical interventions underlines gender as a matter of construction. However, the approach fails to align with the established criteria for biological sex which include other attributes such as chromosomes,

genitalia, gonads, hormone levels, reproductive capacity, etc. (Bettcher 386). Raymond characterizes the phenomenon of male-to-female (MTF) transition as an intrusion into the boundaries of womanhood, drawing a parallel with the concept of rape (Raymond 104). Male-to-female transsexuals often emphasize the biological transition as a way to achieve womanhood, hence, neglecting the significance of chromosomal sex which determines both sex and gender (Benjamin 7). Within historical context, the chromosomal sex emerges as the only defining factor in understanding the essence of being a man or woman. The description of body transition and inhabiting the desired body through surgical interventions by the transsexuals highlights a choice made by them (Parimala 466). Jay Prosser critiques male-to-female transsexuals for allegedly holding a narrow perspective regarding sex, hence, their claims of authentic women are devoid of a legitimate base. Moreover, the term “women” encapsulates a historical position marked by subjugation and the female body is symbolic of the marginalisation experienced within a patriarchal society. Transsexuals’ autobiographies claiming the corporeal transition as a way to attain womanhood lack logical coherence.

Sandy Stone’s *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1987), a notable contribution to transgender studies, focused on critical insights of Janice Raymond regarding the discipline. Stone exclaims that a substantial amount of research on transsexualism is conducted by cisgender medical practitioners. Transsexual women like cisgender women have been “too illogical” to articulate their experiences in a language that is their own. The dominance of medical discourses refrains them from actively participating in their discourse namely the trans discourse. The post-transition discourse of transsexuals resembles the discourse by women and not existing into the category that challenges binary constructs. Hence, transsexuals are commonly involved in “blurring the boundaries” of gender by stating a ‘denial of mixture’ (Stone 158). Another reason behind their alignment with the binaries is the prevalent heteronormativity that compels them to conform to the standardized definition of genders for societal inclusion. To present a counter-discourse and challenge the binaries, the transsexual subjects ought to adopt the mode of expression termed ‘writing through the body’. With the aforementioned analytical lenses, the present paper tries to contribute to the present research centering on the life experiences A. Revathi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi.

Trapped in the ‘wrong body’

Since their early childhood, both Revathi and Laxmi experienced a profound dissatisfaction with their bodies due to the incongruence between the physical body and internal gender identity. Although they were assigned male at birth, they experienced the gender identity of a woman, which led to a gender reversal childhood. In the initial chapter of her autobiography, Revathi (born Doraiswamy) elucidates her inclination towards activities traditionally associated with girls. She articulates, “I played only girls’ games. I loved to sweep the front yard clean and draw the *kolam* every morning” (Revathi 3). Drawing *kolam* in the courtyard is customarily undertaken by female members of the family in India. Additionally, Revathi derives pleasure from wearing feminine clothes. As soon as she reaches home from school, she cannot wait to put on her sister's skirt. She enjoys dressing femininely and strolls gently, acting like a shy bride. Laxmi, on the other hand, exhibited femininity in her appearance and preferred to be in the company of girls at school. However, she gets attracted to the good-looking boys around her. While talking to Ashok Rao Kawi, an activist, she remains confused regarding her desire for boys: “Why am I not like everyone else? Am I abnormal? (11).

Both individuals, Revathi and Laxmi, grapple with a persistent state of turmoil and the intricate nature of their experiences. Revathi reflects on her confusion, expressing uncertainty about the appropriateness of her feelings: “I was a boy and yet I felt I could love other boys. Was this right or wrong? (14)”. She articulates a sense of being not “wholly male or wholly female (17)”. In contrast, Laxmi initiates her autobiography by highlighting the absence of joy in her childhood memories. She says, “The sweet memories of childhood enrapture everyone. But not me. I’m different because I don’t have a happy childhood” (Tripathi 1). She further says, “A hijras’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). The unhappy childhood not only points towards the dilemma of a mismatched body and mind but also the episodes of molestation experienced during her early years.

Gender Dysphoria or a sensation of dissatisfaction with one’s gender becomes evident in the early years of both authors. Revathi and Laxmi begin to sense the incongruity between internal gender identity and the external physical manifestation. Despite residing within male bodies, they sense their true selves as women, experiencing a sense of being confined within the wrong body. Revathi was in class tenth when she experienced a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness that haunted her, day in and day out. She articulates, “A woman trapped in a man’s body was how I thought of

myself” (14). Laxmi calls herself “effeminate.” While expressing the anguish experienced by transsexuals, she states, “A transgender’s male body is a trap- not just to the transgender itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a transgender to be a man” (Tripathi 40). Various other trans autobiographers have narrated their experiences in common terminology. Manabi Bandhopadhyay, India’s first transgender principal, elucidates her condition in her autobiography *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi*, describing it as a “metamorphosis” and identifying as a “woman trapped in a man’s body” (Bandhopadhyay 06). Transsexuals want to be recognized according to their psychological sex hence, physiology becomes a ‘wrong body’ for them. Harry Benjamin in his significant contribution *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966) notes grapples with the desire for a gender reversal role, aspiring to align with the right body through medical procedures, thereby making gender surgeries the locus of the autobiographies (Mason-Schrock 176). The instances of cross-dressing function as opportunities for temporary relief from the wrong body, offering a pseudo-pleasure of having the right body. Revathi and Laxmi feel pleasure in wearing outfits and replicating the roles assigned to women in society. Another trans autobiographer, Living Smile Vidya, an Indian Trans actor, calls cross-dressing “the secret life” and “the best medicine for my depression” (Vidya 32) in her autobiography *I am Vidya* (2014). The desire to be in the right body underscores the marginalisation experienced by gender-variant individuals in a heteronormative society, where the misalliance of body and mind is often met with societal disdain. Such individuals frequently encounter homophobic violence both within family and society as well. Consequently, social rejection leads to limited survival opportunities compelling them to indulge in occupations such as *badhai*, begging and sex work. The prevailing societal norm mandates the congruence of assigned sex and gender identity. Transsexuals, subjected to the ‘politics of exclusion’, seek alignment with the right body to secure space in the heteronormative society.

‘Beyond the binary model’ and ‘the wrong-body model’

Trans authors consistently employed phrases such as ‘trapped in a wrong body’, ‘trapped in a man’s body’, ‘metamorphosis’, ‘miswiring’ and similar expressions to articulate their experiences. This shared terminology is prevalent among trans authors and underscores the widespread adoption of ‘the wrong body model’. The idea of being trapped in a wrong body aligns with the medical explanation of transsexuality where the technical term gender dysphoria encapsulates the same situation. Gender Dysphoria or Gender Identity Disorder has been characterised as a mental

illness under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders- III. The utilization of medical framework by transsexual individuals offers a glimpse into their self-perception in terms of mental health.

Laxmi came in contact with other transgender individuals and was introduced to the *hijra* culture. The inclusion into the *guru-chela* system and adherence to the norms of the sub-culture provided transgender individuals with a sense of security from the discriminative glances of society. The *guru-chela* system is the parallel institution to the conventional joint family structure and concurrently serves as a counter-culture to the heteronormative societal framework. Within the system, the *chelas* or disciples are obligated to offer a share of their income to the *gurus*, thereby ensuring economic support for the latter in their later years. The system signifies the position 'beyond the binary'. Revathi chose to permanently depart from her familial home and started living with the people of the trans community. Laxmi, however, didn't encounter rejection from her biological family but opted to integrate herself into the *hijra* community. In her autobiography, she constructs herself as a member of the third gender or *hijra* culture confirming her existence beyond the binaries of gender. She states: "When I become a hijra, a great burden was lifted of my head. I felt relaxed. I was now neither a man nor a woman. I was hijra. I had my own identity" (43). Revathi started living in the company of *pottais* (transgender individuals) and got indulged in the predetermined roles within the transgender community. Her persistent desire to get rid of the genitals and inhabit the right body remains a constant theme in her life. In contrast, Laxmi doesn't explicitly articulate the desire to change the assigned sex. She did undergo hormone therapy as part of her journey reflecting her desire and preference for a female-like body.

The select authors emphasize the physical rather than the mental aspect of their identity. Notably, none of them explicitly discussed having a "wrong mind." They utilise the wrong body phrases to exhibit the dilemma they go through. However, the emphasis on the physical realm has raised several critical enquiries by scholars such as Janice Raymond and Jay Prosser who argue that transsexual individuals attach undue importance to the body in their narratives. The pathological procedures such as hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery are merely "feminization of a man, or the masculinization of a woman" (Raymond 3). Raymond contends that masculinity and femininity are social constructs and highlight the stereotypes of behaviour prescribed for male and female and thus, have no relation with the physical sex. Moreover, the assertions made by male-to-female transsexuals that they have become women are devoid of logic. The terms 'woman' or

‘becoming a woman’ after adherence to medical procedures by the selected authors convey the aspect of gender as determined by one’s sex.

Transgender discourse- Revathi vs Laxmi

Revathi and Laxmi undergo medical interventions to attain the desired body and live as a ‘culturally intelligible’ individual conforming to universal expectations of the genders. The pre-transition self of Revathi underscores the confusion that most of the transgender experience placing herself beyond the binaries. However, the post-operative autobiographical account illuminates a self which emerges from “the erasure of the previous self”. She expresses, “I WAS ECSTATIC—I was at last a woman”... “I felt like I had been born again” (74-75). The narrative expounds her transition from beyond the binaries to the binaries. The fluidity in the self is erased by the binary discourse of a woman. The account highlights a deliberate effort to “blurring the boundaries of gender” by stating a ‘denial of mixture’. In this way, Revathi’s assertion of herself as a woman is a woman discourse in itself but fails to develop a counter-discourse to the heteronormative discourse. As Stone mentions “...it is difficult to generate a counter-discourse if one is programmed to disappear” (164). To generate an effective discourse, transsexuals need to adopt a writing model that conveys the life experiences of transsexuals in their language. They ought to put their body to the writing and commence a new tradition of trans discourse. However, she remained aligned with the trans culture even after getting the "right body" and "passing" as a woman. The subsequent sections of the autobiography delve into greater detail about her life in the community house, where she spends her time with other *chelas* and her *guru*. She also accepts a position as a trans activist under *Sangama*, an NGO that supports transgender persons. She raises community members' understanding of transgender concerns. However, transsexuals are often accused of rejecting the community to erase their identity of gender variance.

On the contrary, Laxmi maintains her position in the beyond-the-binary paradigm. She intimately understands the internal struggles of being transgender. Although she is indulged in cross-dressing and adorns herself with women’s accessories, she doesn’t explicitly express the ambition of becoming a woman. She inherently identifies as a woman. Upon joining the transgender community she articulates: “I was now neither a man nor a woman” (43). Unlike Revathi’s autobiography, Laxmi’s account doesn’t showcase a change in the post-transition script hence, preserving the essence of the third gender which is equivalent to the ‘third genre’ and ‘genres are

not to be mixed' (Stone 168). She generates a counter-discourse to heteronormativity by not conforming to a traditional post-transition narrative.

Conclusion

Trans individuals are compelled to stay outside of mainstream society due to the reinforced heterosexuality discourses propagated by the medical, legal, and religious sectors. The community still yearns to be included. In the select autobiographical narratives, Revathi and Laxmi feel their body as an incomplete explanation of their inner self. Both of them feel a woman inside but trapped in a male's body. The term "wrong body," which conveys a sense of being confined, demonstrates the influence of the medical discourse on transsexuality. Therefore, it is necessary to counter the traditional cisgender explanation of transsexuality. Transsexuals ought to 'write through the body' and convey the experiences in their language without blurring the boundaries of gender and without assiduously adhering to and blending into the 'normal'.

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