

A Critical Reading of the Life and Struggle of a Transgender through the Eyes of A. Revathi in Her Autobiography the Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story

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Abstract-The purpose of the paper is to study the life and struggle of transgenders and their community in India who are subjugated by the heteronormative patriarchal society and their stereotyped ideas and practices. The autobiography "is the first of its kind in English from a member of the Hijra Community". The intention of the author is not to solicit sympathy but to make the heteronormative society aware that transgenders also have feelings, emotions and a normal life similar to theirs and long to be accepted.

Keywords: Critical reading, Queer, suppression, autobiography, marginalization, trauma

Introduction

"One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman" says Simone de Beauvoir. In a heteronormative patriarchal society caught up within the binary opposites of male and female, where the female is generally pushed to the periphery, we see that there is no representation of the "third gender" or the "transgender". Transgenders are people caught up in the body of the opposite sex and are generally considered abnormal and hence treated as the "other".

A. Revathi's autobiography 'The Truth about Me' is first of its kind in English from a member of the Hijra community. Revathi, a Namakkal based writer and activist employs writing to practice her activism. By use of colloquial, informal style she writes about her journey of life as a Hijra. A Hijra is a transgender who becomes a complete female through surgical removal of the genitals from a male to a female. The author does not use euphemism and sugarcoat her writing but rather showcases the harsh reality that the Hijras face in their everyday life and their efforts to become a part of a reformed society which accepts the Hijras and Transgender community as its integral part.

Hijras and the society

The Hijras take a laid-back position in the society though they are seen as an incarnation of Lord Shiva as "Ardhanarishvara" and are considered sacred and important during festivals, childbirth and weddings. These people who are looked upon

as sacred and God like are the same people who are considered as sexual minorities, and are ill-treated and subjugated to humiliation and abuse. As a consequence of a Hijra's confused sexual preference they generally discontinue their studies at a very early stage and a majority of hijras do not possess even basic primary education. Lack of education together with their confused sexual preference which isolates them from the heteronormative society pushes them into menial jobs such as begging and sex work.

Marginalization of the Hijra community begins from a Hijra's own family. A hijra is generally treated as abnormal or diseased and hence considered a disgrace to the family and community that they live in. "I am not diseased. I consider myself a woman. But I possessed the form of a man, I wanted to rid myself of that form and live as a complete woman. How can that be wrong?"(262) Fearing rejection and alienation very often Hijras suppress their feminine feelings, emotions and desires and try to come to terms with themselves and live for the sake of others which Revathi resisted. "It was like eating for me- just as I would not stop eating because someone asked me not to eat, I felt I could not stop being a girl, because others told me I ought not to be so."(7). In the case of Revathi from her childhood we see that she was always a woman. But, a woman trapped inside a man's body. She was never able to address her confusions to her parents or siblings and hence her confusions

remained chained. "I was a boy and yet I felt I could love other boys, was this right or wrong? I could not talk to anyone about my confusions"(9). In the process of practicing what Revathi felt and desired to be (being a woman) she became a "regular source of amusement and curiosity"(6)and her stammer only oiled the fire. She was treated as an object of gaze and mockery. "Girl- boy! 'ali!' 'Number 9!' my heart would sink at these words" (6). Getting teased had become an integral part of her though she felt bad she was accustomed to it. Revathi imagined and behaved like a complete woman she longed to dress like women. Adorn with flowers and flaunt around with glittering clothes and beautiful jewellery. She imitated the women she saw. She picked up their language, their body language, and learnt all the work that were expected to be done by a woman like sweeping the front yard and drawing the kolam every day, helping her "mother in the kitchen, sweeping and swabbing, washing vessels". Later in life we see that Revathi longed to be a typical Indian woman. She longed to be a loving girlfriend, wife and a mother doing all the household and taking over her family. When she did get into a relationship and married her colleague she was seen as a typical Indian woman doing all the stereotypic jobs assigned. "He often worked late and returned home only at night; I'd get dinner ready and wait for him. Even if I was hungry, I'd wait and eat with him. He'd tell me not to wait for him and eat if I was hungry. I'd protest, 'but I like eating with you.'"(272). To Revathi getting married was her ultimate goal and meant a fearless life." For me marriage would confirm that I was living a womanly life" (273).

The Journey

In her journey to become a complete woman, she not only faced abuse and humiliation but also went through physical, mental and psychological suffering on an everyday basis. Revathi spent almost her entire childhood in Salem with the deep and nagging unease of being trapped in a male's body and by 'a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness' but if at all she behaved like one of her girl-playmates, she was only humiliated and violence was inflicted upon her by both her family and community. These deeply

traumatizing incidents led to her poor performance in academics and as a result she dropped out of school. In her quest to practice her feelings and emotions she left her family and familiar place deserting her home. She travelled to different cities and places like Dindigul, Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, etc. She went with people like her (Hijras). Revathi found comfort in them, felt accepted and wanted. Her confusions about her sexual preferences and identity were resolved only when she met people of her kind.

"Around 7 in the evening, when the twilight hour gives way to the gathering dark. I saw four men dressed in lungis climbing up. I noticed that they swung their hands as they walked and that one of them had grown his hair long. They stopped at a point below where I was sitting and I could hear them address each other as girls do. After some time, they began to dance a women's dance" (17)

It was only then that she got aware that people like her did exist but most of them practiced it in their wardrobe. "it appeared to me that we were similar, that our voices and gestures were not very different. And as I continued to speak, I felt close to him, even affectionate, and my heart grew calm."(18)

" But here, in Namakkal, we could be women only on the hill. We could fold up our lungis and address each other as women. I guess these men were more my female comrades than mere friends; my *thozhis*, in fact." (18) It was from these people did Revathi learn "that there were people like us who wore saris and had had an 'operation', and that they lived in Erode and Dindigul. I learnt too that that some of them even went as far as Delhi and Mumbai." (18)

On leaving Namakkal, Revathi found many new people of her kind and also a family for herself in the Hijra community. Like many other communities in India the Hijras also have a unique culture and tradition that was taught to Revathi over time. Their practices were much different from what the Hetero normative society follows. Every Hijra had a 'Guru' who was like a mother and a caretaker. The daughters of the Gurus were called the 'Chela'. The chelas were taken care and given protection by the guru and on the other hand the chelas were expected to earn a living for

her guru and herself. The Hijras had completely different kin terms such as

“Badudaadi- great-grandmother’s guru
Daadaguru-grandmother’s guru (great-grandmother)
Nanaguru-guru’s guru (grandmother)
Guru- mother
Kaalaguru- guru’s sister
Gurubai- (my) sister
Badagurubai- elder sister
Chotagurubai- younger sister
Chela- daughter
Naathi- chela- granddaughter
Chandichela-great-granddaughter\sadak-naathi-great-granddaughters’s daughter”(64)

The hijras have limited employment choices since they do not have the basic education. Most often they beg around in streets and shops or do sex work because they are not provided with employment. Each Hijra group or clan has its own guru and a work that they do. If a group of Hijras do sex work they do not go to beg and the ones who beg do not do sex work. They have separate rules for each clans. Giving blessings and performing in public and temple events are done as part time jobs. While begging and doing sex work they not only get humiliated but face violence at the hands of shopkeepers, rowdies and the police. The Hijras are looked upon as mere objects of gaze. They forget that Hijras have feelings and emotions and are hence assaulted and abused.

Every Hijra’s ultimate goal is to become a woman both physically and mentally and for this reason a hijra has to undergo a “nirvaanam” which is the surgical removal of the genitals.

“When I was wearing men’s cloth, I wanted to wear what women did. But after wearing women’s clothes, and trying to live like a women, I still felt that I was a man. So, when nani sent me off for my operation, I felt that finally the female in me would be freed from her male body.”(67)

One’s nirvaanam is sponsored by the chela’s guru and can be done only with the permission of the guru. Hijras are not provided with proper medical facilities. Also they do not have sufficient money or financial support to do their surgery in a sterile atmosphere. Above all it is not legal to do

nirvaanam and are done illegally in remote and unsterile conditions. A nirvaanam can be done either by a doctor or a ‘*thayamma*’ “A *thayamma* operation is performed by one hijra on another; an operation performed by a doctor takes place in a hospital.”(66) “I was afraid to opt for a *thayamma* operation. On the other hand, I knew that those who had nirvaanam done by that method enjoyed a special status and were respected”(66). Revathi in her autobiography explains in detail the surgical procedure, the before and after effect of the surgery in detail without camouflaging or sugarcoating her words.

It is only of late that Hijras, their needs and problems are being addressed by the society and the government. After much effort by activists and NGO’s working for the welfare of these hijras and transgender that the government and society have begun to acknowledge the existence of the third gender. Hijras go through multi layers of oppression they are not just oppressed from the hetero normative society but are oppressed even more because they are Hijras. Joining ‘*sangama*’ was a life changing event in Revathi’s life. Finally she found a job in which she could acquaint with the world and live like the others. Attending seminars and workshops in *Sangama* taught Revathi about “sexual minorities, and about minorities in general; about violations against dalits and adivasis; Hindu- Muslim differences and conflicts”(242). Revathi challenged the stereotypical and incorrect perceptions of sexual minorities. Over time, she was completely transformed and she began to realize that being a Hijra was not her fault, nor was she responsible for being isolated from the mainstream society or for being ripped off her rights and being pushed into beggary and sex work. This realization increased her desire to work for the rights of those in her community who had faced as much or more violence and difficulties than her. She wanted to fight against sexual violence and *Sangama* helped her with her fight as it gave her the opportunity to realize her vocation as a social worker. *Sangama* not only created a social worker and an activist in Revathi but also a writer. Though she began to write in order to overcome the losses in her life it eventually became her passion. Revathi published her first book in Tamil called *Unarvum Uruvamum*

which is a collection of real life stories of the people belonging to the Hijra community. It was during this process that she decided to come out with her own autobiography because she felt that she would be able to bring out the problems of her community through her life story. '*The Truth about Me* is an unflinchingly courageous and moving autobiography of a hijra who fought ridicule, persecution and violence both within her home and outside to find a life of dignity.'

Conclusion

Revathi becomes the voice of the voiceless through her writing and activism. She stands as a fierce fighter and a role model for many who identify themselves as a part of the third gender. From being a victim of violence and harassment to being a writer and a strong activist advocating for the rights of her community, she addresses the agony and trauma that has become a part of a hijra's life in hopes of a more tolerant, accepting, accommodating and a changed society where the third gender can also have a normal life as the bisexuals.

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