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WRITING TRANSGENDERED SELF

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Abstract

Transgenders, or, Hijras, as they are popularly known in India, form a community that occupies a liminal space in society. They face social exclusion and discrimination. Just they have been denied space in society, they have also been denied a voice or representation in literature. However, in 2010, A. Revathi, a transgender, came up with her autobiography titled *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, which was followed by *I Am Vidya* by Vidya in 2013. In this paper I am going to focus on the autobiography of Vidya, where she talks about her struggles as a *hijra* and her anger and resentment that she feels for the society. In addition to the psychological space of the *hijras*, I have also focused on the parts of the autobiography where she writes about the everyday life of *hijras*.

Key-Words

Hijra, Transgender, Autobiography, Identity, Discrimination.

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An autobiography can be defined as an account of a person's life, most often written by that person. In his book, *Dalit Personal Narratives*, Raj Kumar defines the term autobiography by "splitting it into its three components: auto-self, bio-life, graph-writing" (2). Thus, the idea of self, life and the process of writing becomes integral to any discussion of this narrative style. The self that is presented in most such writings is in a process of evolution and negotiation with the society, especially in the case of accounts written by people who belong to marginal communities. In this paper, I will analyze the way transgenders, or *hijras*, negotiate their way through the society in India by attempting a critical analysis of *I Am Vidya* (2013), written by Vidya which is considered to be the second autobiographical account emerging from the transgender community in India, the first being *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), written by A. Revathi.

OED defines 'transgender' (adj.) as a term that denotes or relates to a person whose self-identity does not conform unambiguously to conventional notions of male or female gender. Such people have existed since the beginning of human race, but scant attention has been paid to their lives and the difficulties they have to encounter every day. However, we see efforts being made to study and understand these doubly marginal individuals by the mid-1990s when "the early rubric of gay and lesbian studies had expanded to become lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) studies." It was also during this phase that "the word 'transgender' became an umbrella term for transsexuals, drag queens or drag kings, transgendered people and others who blur and cross gender boundaries" (Stimpson, Herdt 14-15).

In India, the popular term used to define transgenders is *hijras*. In the foreword to the book *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, written by Gayatri Reddy, Gautam Bhan writes about *hijras* as "symbolic of a liminal space between 'men' and 'women'" (ix). Ruth Vanita defines them in her seminal work *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* as "female identified males, some of whom are transgendered, others transsexual, and a few intersexed. They take female names, and dress in female garments, but their body language, gestures, and occupation clearly identify them in public spaces as *hijras*, not women" (68).

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Based on these two definitions of *hijras*, it becomes apparent that they occupy a liminal space in the Indian society owing to their gender, or lack thereof. However, at the same time, they are also distinguishable from men and women as most of them are born as men who feel and want to live like women. Thus, if we borrow from the title of a book on *hijras* by Serena Nanda which is referred to in the following pages, they are “neither man nor woman,” reminding us about the ambiguous nature of their social self in our culture.

Traditionally, *hijras* are supposed to live a life of an ascetic. They should “renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation, that is, an excision of the penis and testicles- dedicated to the goddess Bedhraj Mata”. This sacrifice is believed to endow *hijras* with the power “to confer fertility on newlyweds or newborn children” (Reddy 2). However, Serena Nanda notes a disjunction that comes from the contrast between “the cultural definition of *hijras* as emasculated men and the fact that not all *hijras* undergo the emasculation operation” (xx). The fact that one needs to undergo the emasculation operation also points towards the reality that most of the *hijras* are not born hermaphrodites, rather they are conditioned or constructed in that particular manner. Thus, they are “made’ instead of being ‘born that way’” (Nanda xx). Therefore, their lives become a journey towards achieving a stereotypical feminine body.

The autobiography that has been chosen for analysis in this paper serves a crucial purpose, as till now *hijras* have only been written about. They have never written about themselves. However, this work charts an unknown territory by vigorously engaging with the issues that are at the centre of the lives of transgenders or *hijras* in India. In the preface to *The Truth About Me*, Revathi speaks of herself as a marginal presence in the society because she is a *hijra* and also because she is engaged in sexual work. But she also makes the aim of writing the narrative about herself crystal clear to us, as she states that she intends “to introduce to the readers the lives of *hijras*, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires” (v). The autobiography of Vidya, however, takes us straight into the life and mind of a *hijra*. But the anger and resentment that she feels for the society become apparent towards the end of the narrative when she writes about the need on the part of *hijras* “to belong, just as the rest of humanity needs to belong” (131).

I Am Vidya begins with a chapter titled ‘Nirvana’, which is a term used by *hijras* or *tirunangais* to describe the emasculation operation which they undergo in order to become “real *hijras*”. Reddy addresses the issue by stating that “‘having nothing there’ [pointing towards the lack of penis] was an important marker of authenticity, proof that the individual in question was a ‘real *hijra*’” (92). This also earns them respect in the eyes of other *hijras*. Further, one who undergoes nirvana operation, carried out by a dayamma, rather than one performed by a surgeon, earns even more respect in the *hijra* community. The word ‘nirvana’, however, has another meaning as well. Derived from Buddhist philosophy, the word, as defined in the OED, means a transcendent state in which there is neither suffering, nor desire, nor sense of self, and the subject is released from the effects of karma and the cycle of death and rebirth. It represents the final goal of Buddhism. Nirvana is also the final goal of a *hijra*’s life. In her autobiography, Vidya also starts begging around the shops as a *hijra* because she wants to save money to get the nirvana done. She describes nirvana as “an operation- the operation that would slash and remove the sin of my birth as a male” (98). Though there are risks involved, as survival after surgery is not guaranteed, most of the *hijras* opt for this operation.

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Vidya also discusses the lack of availability of medical facilities in India to *hijras* and someone who wants to undergo the emasculation surgery. Since such operations are not legal in India, they are done on the sly and under dubious hygienic conditions. She writes about the proper procedure that is followed in countries where sex reassignment surgery (SRS) is legal and comparing it with Indian situation, she reminds us that in India it is a mere castration they have to undergo, pointing towards a complete absence of medical infrastructure for the members of her marginalized community.

This is a satirical comment on the healthcare facilities available to the transgenders in India. They have to “face discrimination even in the healthcare settings. Often, medical providers rarely have the opportunity to understand the sexual diversities and they do not have adequate knowledge about the health issues of sexual minorities” (“Hijras/Transgender Women in India” 8). But later in the narrative, she recalls another operation that she underwent for appendicitis, which was done in a better environment. This discrepancy between two operations illustrates the fact that a normal operation could be carried out properly, but nirvana could not, because of the stigma attached to the one who undergoes such an operation.

Owing to the stigma that an operated- upon *hijra* carries with her, they find it difficult to gain acceptance in society. Often, their own families would not accept them. In the narrative, Vidya’s new identity of a *tirunangai* is accepted by her sister and mother, but her father refuses to see her dressed in women’s clothes. This becomes the cause of conflict between Vidya and her father. In this instance, her family becomes a representative of the society they live in, which views a *hijra* or transgender as an ‘other’ and acts as a source of psychological harassment to her. We come across a similar incident in the life story of Revathi as well. She writes about the pain and sufferings she had to undergo to claim her share of property. Her brothers threatened her that she cannot inherit the property as her gender has now changed. But Revathi was aware of her rights and her situation as a *hijra*. She knows only too well that she would not be accepted and respected in the society if she does not have money. But not all transgenders are conscious of their rights, and thus, they fail to inherit anything.

Hijras are perennial victims of social and cultural exclusion in our society. They are often discriminated against, particularly in the southern region of the country. This is one of the reasons behind their migration to the northern cities like Mumbai, Pune, Kolkata and Delhi. Vidya also undertakes a journey from Chennai to Pune to become a member of the *hijra* community. Apart from discrimination, another factor, which has led to their constant flow to these places, is that in the north “people see them as avatars of Krishna. Either people think it is good to receive their blessings, or fear that their curses could come true” (Vidya 81). They are seen as auspicious presences, but with inauspicious potential as well (Nanda 6).

Religious myths about *hijras* are quite popular in the south as well. An annual festival takes place in the state of Tamil Nadu to celebrate a “male-male wedding” based on the legend that Krishna takes a female form of Mohini to grant the last wish of Aravan, son of Arjuna, who offered himself “as a sacrifice to goddess Kali to ensure victory for the Pandavas” (Vanita 75). But he wants to enjoy conjugal bliss before he dies. So Krishna, in the form of Mohini, marries him and later mourns his death the next day, like a widow. The *tirunangais* also dress up like a bride for the ceremony in the temple and later, mourn like a widow for Aravan. Since they see themselves as Aravan’s widow, they are also known as

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Aravanis. Even though such religious myths about *tirunangais* are popular in the southern states, *tirunangais* still get victimized at the hands of the social institutions like law and police.

Through this autobiography, we get to know that most of the *hijras* are born men, but they experience life like a woman. They feel like they are women trapped in men's bodies. But this feeling changes the moment they get to dress up like women, for this is when they can unleash their heart's desires. The moment of bliss for Vidya is when her male genitals are removed from her body. She writes, "It was a huge relief. I was now a woman: mine was a woman's body. Its shape would be what my heart wanted, had yearned for. This pain would obliterate all earlier pains" (8). Along with this also comes a yearning from her side, for the society to accept her as a woman.

The idea of identity as performance becomes important in order to define *hijras*. Since they strive towards a certain ideal of feminine self, their present self is an imitation of the traditional feminine self. Known as *hijra* in north India, *kojja* in Telugu and *pottai* in Tamil, as eunuchs, *hijras* can be seen as men minus maleness. But, "in their outward appearance and behavior" they are "man plus woman" (Nanda 17). It is pertinent to mention what Judith Butler writes in this regard as she explains the phenomenon of gender as a performance: "Gender is a stylized repetition of acts... which are internally discontinuous... [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief." (179).

Sex and Gender are two terms which are often used interchangeably. But there is a difference between these terms. Sex refers to a person's biological status as man or woman, while gender refers to the attitudes, behaviors and feelings that are associated with a person's biological sex, which can be forced upon people by the society. Though born masculine, *hijras* see themselves as women and most of them desire men. And one of the definitions of a *hijra* is someone who is the receptive partner in sexual relations with men. *Panti* is the name that *hijras* give to their male partners. A *panti* is a masculine man who is penetrative in sexual intercourse and a *hijra* is an effeminate man who is the receptive partner of *panti* (Reddy 44). However, men who take on "an active penetrator role in sexual relations with men are not differentiated from other members of their gender" (Nanda 141). This definition of a *hijra* is important to them because they aspire towards a feminine self, and a feminine self is traditionally seen as a passive, receptive self in sexual intercourse. Thus, a *hijra* would perform the role of a woman with a masculine man.

Though Vidya does not desire any man, either before the nirvana operation or after that, Revathi enters sex work mainly because she wanted to experience sexual pleasure. Most *hijras*, like Revathi, engage in prostitution, but Vidya stayed away from this occupation. She chose begging over sex work but she was still victimized by the social institutions that failed to see her as a woman. Vidya cites an incident when she finds herself on the receiving end of the institution of law. She wanted to change her name officially from Sarvanan to Vidya, but when she approached the legal authorities for the same reason, her application was initially refused; she was successful in her attempt only after a year and a half (133-135). This episode shows that transgenders face exclusion and discrimination everywhere in society. The procedure that usually takes a month, took a year and a half for Vidya only because of her being a transgender. And without getting their names changed, transgenders or *hijras* cannot enroll

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themselves in any educational program or seek employment. And when they don't have any other means of earning their livelihood, they turn to sex work and begging ("Hijras/Transgender Women in India" 9).

There are many laws that govern the lives of the *hijras*. Though these are unwritten laws and not recognized by the Indian lawmakers, they are followed sincerely by the members of the community. Most of these established rules require them to look and behave in a feminine manner. They are not allowed to cut their hair short and should always be dressed in saris. Wearing women's clothes is one of the defining characteristic of the *hijras*. This is seen in the narrative when, before becoming a *hijra*, Vidya becomes a regular visitor to an NGO that works for the rights of the transgenders. She writes, "At the NGO, I regularly met people like me who went around in male garb but were women in spirit and urges- known as *kothis*... some of whom had even undergone the sex change operation. These were known as *tirunangais*" (47). Further, they are forbidden from performing activities that are primarily masculine. For example, they are prohibited from shaving, as it leads to the growth of hard facial hair. Rather, they should pluck them out to keep their skin smooth as that of a woman's. A *hijra* who fails to follow these basic rules is not seen as a real *hijra*, as the identity of *hijras* hinges upon their appearance. It is only through their outward form and gestures that one can identify them as *hijras*.

Since the transgenders face discrimination in society, most of them try to conceal their true identity from others. Vidya confesses that even she would not disclose her true feelings to the people at the NGO. She writes, "In the midst of all that, I did not reveal my true self to any of the participants... whenever my friends probed me, I claimed to be on a visit researching *kothis* and *tirunangais*. When I went out with them I controlled myself enough to act like a man" (48).

The same fear of facing disapproval of the society makes their families sever ties with them once they join the *hijra* community. And their families are but representatives of a world of men and women in which a man who has undergone a transformation to become a woman holds no position of authority and commands no respect in society. Such a situation makes the *hijras* experience a sense of loss of family and kinship ties. But this sense of loss stays only for a short period of time, as the household they become a member of, becomes their new and alternative family.

Vidya was registered with the Bhandi Bazaar *parivar*. There are seven *hijraparivars* in Chennai, each with a different name. And anyone who wants to become a *hijra* has to become a part of one of these households. They are required to take on a female name before joining the *hijra* community. Vidya writes, "A *tirunangai* wanting a change to a new group has to pay a fine, a kind of transfer fee, to the *parivar* she is leaving" (75). She also familiarizes us with the hierarchy of relations in these *parivars*, "Usually, the young *tirunangai* chooses her *amma*, and becomes her *chela* or disciple. She is also named her *nani'snathichela*. A senior *chela* is an elder sister to the relatively junior *chela*" (75). This is, however, an all-female world, devoid of any male presence.

Vidya is not a culturally or socially privileged subject as she is a transgender who also belongs to a Dalit family. But her caste identity is not a source of discrimination within the *hijra* community. This attends to the fact that this kind of marginalization, on the basis of sexual preference, cuts through the differences of caste and class. Every member of this marginalized community faces same kinds of problems in dealing with the larger society. Both Vidya and Revathi desire to take on the conventional gender identity of a woman, and want to take up a job to earn their living. But not only are they denied

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any opportunity to fulfill their desires, they are harassed and are compelled into accepting that theirs is an unrealistic dream. It is a society that does not allow transgenders to accept a job; it also condemns them for begging and engaging in sexual work. Both Vidya and Revathi are not able to procure certain important documents under their new female names. This brings us to Vidya's comment upon the condition of Indian society, "There is absolutely no social security for transgenders in India. Who will step forward to help us, when the government itself is unprepared to extend any kind of basic recognition" (92). Thus, denial of documents such as voter ID card or ration card to transgenders is in a way denial of their identity.

The transgenders form a community that is the object of everyone's ridicule. However, being forced to realize that they are not accepted in the society of males and females, they start looking upon the larger world as "something ridiculous" (93). It is a social world that disrespects them and victimizes them because of their prejudiced beliefs. Also, it is a society that fails to respect the rights of a transgendered woman and also treats her violently. Both Vidya and Revathi narrate incidents from their lives when they are physically assaulted by people. In many instances, not just the common people but police also used force of violence on them. In their case, the protectors of people themselves become the perpetrators of violence, leaving the *hijras* no place to approach to complaint against the injustice and harassment they face in the society.

In this novel, what we see emerging is, thus, the self of a transgendered woman. It is a fluid self. Vidya's identity keeps changing throughout the narrative. She begins as a young boy, who realizes that he is a woman. Then she takes on the role of a *kothi* in private, when she spends time with her friends on the hill or dances wearing women's clothes during festivals. Then comes the realization that she cannot continue to live as a man and thus, joins the *hijra* community. Then she goes for the nirvana, after which the feminine self comes to the fore. Before the emasculation operation, Vidya would take part in cross dressing, but after this procedure, she emerges with the body of a woman, her transformation complete.

The narrative of this autobiography is like a manifesto of transgenders. The oppressed subject that has hitherto remained voiceless, gets a voice, and the voice is used to complain about all the injustice they have faced till then. Through the 'I' of the title, we enter the communal space of *hijras*. As the narrative progresses, a movement is noticed from a singular 'I' towards a collective 'we'. It becomes a way of asserting the identity of the entire community. It is a society that sees transgenders as abnormal but Vidya questions this definition of normality. However, normal can be defined as normative. Anything that disrupts the normative is seen as threatening to the status quo of the society and is seen as a potentially dangerous subject, which also becomes abnormal.

At the end of the autobiography, Vidya tries to convey her feelings of hurt and anger to the readers. She tries to make us understand that transgenders are no different from men and women, and they do not deserve to be either ridiculed or marginalized. Through her narrative, she also highlights the idea that transgenders are believed to be closer to God and that their curses may come true. This myth about transgenders makes people fearful of them. But this autobiography is an attempt on her part to bridge the gap between the transgenders and the society so that transgenders are no longer perceived in a negative light or as separated from men and women.

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