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Social Location and Struggles of Selfhood in Laxmi's *Me Hijra*

Me Laxmi and Revathi's The Truth About Me

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Abstract:

Hijras have always been part of Indian culture and society. Although hijras have never been talked about explicitly in earlier literature, there are several references to gender variance, androgynous behaviour, metamorphosis and *tritiya prakriti* in Indian mythology and ancient texts. Over time, they have been stigmatized, marginalized and forced to lead an inferior and invisible life without social, economic and emotional security. The present paper explores the social location and struggles of selfhood in the lives of Revathi and Laxmi within a patriarchal society which also has casteism and sexism. Hijras are at the periphery of society because of many reasons, and prominent among them is the intersectionality of class, caste and gender. The position of hijras gets doubly jeopardized as their gender identity is invariably questioned and belonging to lower caste positions them at the fringes of society. Hijra life narratives talk explicitly about the lived experiences of gender incongruous individuals. The objective of this study is to analyse how Laxmi and Revathi explore their true selves, discover their unique identities and actualise their selfhood in a society that is essentially gender binary. The paper also aims to raise awareness about how social location, patriarchy and gender identity together place hijras at the margins and affect their struggles of selfhood and ultimately the trajectory of their lives.

Keywords: Social location, selfhood, gender identity, hijra, caste and gender.

Introduction:

Hijras have always been part of Indian culture and society but have never been talked about explicitly in earlier literature. There are several references to gender variance, androgynous behaviour, metamorphosis and *tritiya prakriti* in Indian mythology and ancient

texts. Amara Das Wilhelm in *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex* mentions, "The Vedic social system did not neglect or exclude people of the third sex, but rather it accepted and engaged them according to their nature" (26). The religious texts and early Vedic and Pauranic literature does not treat gender variance as an error and acknowledge its rightful place in existence. Devdutt Pattanaik in *The Man Who Was a Woman* mentions, "The entire sexual spectrum and gender fluidity seems to have been captured" in our scriptures (5). With the advent of Islamic migrants and the establishment of Mughal Empire, people of third sex or hijras are seen as an integral part of the Mughal harem and given various positions in the public, political and religious spheres. Hijras' status deteriorates under the British Raj. They are despised by the British and viewed as "ungovernable" filth, "habitual sodomites" and immoral people (Hinchy). Pratibha Arya in "*Who are the Hijra*" rightly observes, "Within the cultural and semi-logical order the role of Hijras became reversed from auspicious in between luminal figures to the frightening transgressor of the symbolic order." Despite having a rich and long tradition of a distinct culture, people of third sex or hijras are ignored and pushed to the periphery because of the colonial ideology, Indian elite imagination and intersectionality of class, caste and gender. Warburton defines intersectionality as, "...people's exposure to the multiple, simultaneous and interactive effects of different types of social organizations or oppression" and their experiences of power (Peoples'). Understanding the link between colonization, culture and social location provides an insight into the struggles of hijras. Ancient India's all-embracing and accommodating culture witnesses a "gradual descent into puritanism and homophobia due to caste consciousness and foreign religious influence," mentions Wilhelm (167).

The present paper explores the social location and struggles of selfhood in Laxmi's *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* and Revathi's *The Truth About Me* in a patriarchal society which also has casteism and sexism. Social location of individuals refers to their social position in society and is particular to each individual. Sociologists define social location as the combination of factors, including gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, education, sexual orientation and geographic location (Inclusion). The social location, prevalent lifestyle and hierarchy of class, caste and gender in society subjects gender minorities and the lower castes to humiliating conditions of existence and marginalization. A. Bishop, in *Becoming an Ally* observes that, "Groups that have a history of oppression and exploitation are pushed further and further from the centres of power that control the shape and destiny of society. These are the margins of society, and this is the process of marginalization" (133). Unfortunately, such a system allows a particular section of society to enjoy their privileges and ignores the

fundamental human rights of the marginalized section of society by maintaining the oppressive caste system, patriarchal system and gender binary system. The ideology of such a system stands against the liberation of minorities by denying them human rights. It is the most inhuman system of oppression where people get discriminated against because of their caste, class and gender. These three social elements of early India resulted in the stratification of people in society. The system is so rigid that people may bypass their class but are never allowed to cross the boundaries of their caste and gender. It makes minorities face discrimination, violence, ridicule and harassment. By dividing and placing people in tight chambers of caste and gender, society creates barriers among human beings and conveniently ignores the existential issues of minorities. In such a scenario, the position of lower-class hijras gets doubly compromised. As hijras, their identity is invariably questioned and belonging to a lower caste position them at the lowest level in society. This system of hierarchy and patriarchy demeans and humiliates lower caste people, subjugates and represses women and completely ignores and ostracizes gender incongruous individuals and hijras.

The social location of individuals becomes crucial as it reflects upon the social characteristics of the group to which one belongs. Knowing one's social location develops an understanding of one's privileges and drawbacks in society, resulting in their being favoured or marginalized and exploited by the very same society. It also highlights one's proximity to authority and power that accounts for their visibility or invisibility as an identity. An uneducated hijra from the lower section of society may get more exploited and marginalized than an educated transgender from the elite group because people don't think alike or experience reality in the same way. Social location shapes an individual's perception of reality and affects their experiences and their way of understanding and interpreting things. It also influences the mindset of the observers and gives them an altogether different perspective on various issues. People located in different positions are brought up differently and have different sets of values. They may be ignorant about the experiences of those who encounter discrimination and oppression. We might judge or see someone in terms of only their caste, class, sexual orientation, gender or other visible or non-visible differences and miss important dimensions of their personality. Unfortunately, the dominant culture's tendency to think of hijras as immoral and vile because of their gender preference and social location has led to serious consequences to them. A tragic example of this is, assuming that a hijra must be creating a scene for money, when in fact; she is trying to protect her dignity. The social location of individuals profoundly influences their identity and their struggles of

selfhood in a patriarchal society. It contributes to who they are, what they become, how they interact with others and how they perceive themselves. It also affects the way they are treated and perceived by others.

Whereas social location reflects upon social characteristics, selfhood is “the quality that constitutes one’s individuality.” To be an individual means that a person is aware of their status, needs, desires and goals, as distinguished from others. Paul Kockleman in “*Agent, person, subject, self*” mentions that “. . . it is the means and ends of one’s own actions, or the object of one’s own beliefs and desires.” Selfhood is related to self and Velleman opines that it is “a reflexive guise under which parts or aspects of a person are presented to its own mind” (2020). Self is the true knower and distinct from mind, body and understanding. A kind of inwardness is associated with self because it is neither viewable nor comprehensible unless and until overtly shared. Watson argues that there are some experiences and knowledge associated with the self, from which one cannot run away and is beyond the other’s comprehension (164). It is this self-knowledge that helps in seeking selfhood in the journey of self-discovery. But it remains invisible for the majority of hijras because of various social, political and psychological reasons. The chosen texts reflect how Laxmi and Revathi explore their true selves, discover their unique identities and actualise their selfhood in a society that is essentially gender binary. The paper also aims to raise awareness about how social location, patriarchy and gender identity together place hijras at the margins and affect their struggles of selfhood and ultimately, the trajectory of their lives.

Synoptic Overview of the Two Narratives:

The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story depicts the transition of a little effeminate boy Doraisamy (Revathi’s original name), born and brought up in a relatively underprivileged and backward class of Gounder caste of Namakkal taluk in Tamil Nadu. Revathi is naturally inclined towards traditionally female activities; and experiences a growing sense of alienation from the body she is born with, “I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered a man” remembers Revathi (Truth 15). Life turns upside-down when the family discovers her femininity and bent of mind. Family members try to mend her ways and repress her gender expression by exercising their regulatory approach in the form of restrictions and physical and verbal abuse. “Every day, my feelings died only to be reborn and to die again . . . I could not bear it anymore, this pain and hurt that wracked my body and mind—which I could not even mention to anybody,” recalls Revathi (32-33). At

the tender age of six or seven, it is beyond her comprehension, why she is being “caned for ‘not being brave like boys’” (7). She remembers, “I did not know that I behave like a girl, it felt natural for me to do so. I did not know how to be like a boy. It was 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”(7). Over time, a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness makes her feel like “a woman trapped in a man’s body.” She finds an outlet to exhibit her true self by dressing up and dancing as a female during festivals (14-15). She experiences a perpetual conflict between her inner feelings and her biological body but feels scared to voice her confusion because of the fear of being bullied and thrashed by her family and friends. The family’s callous, apathetic, insensitive and inhumane attitude toward her feelings and experiences make Revathi’s life miserable and disgusting. She has to bundle up her desires and be in disguise as someone she is not. She feels suffocated and decides to go away from the constricted environment of her home to enjoy and explore her feminine identity in an accepting and welcoming environment of hijras. She desires to be feminine like other women. To accomplish her dream, she has no other option but to join hijras; because the society she lives in does not approve of any behaviour or lifestyle that is not in alignment with the accepted norms. People around her have limited exposure and knowledge about sex and gender. Thus, accepting a gender variant person is beyond their imagination. After being with hijras for a few months, she opts for *nirvaanam*, which means to be reborn as a hijra. But for Revathi, it is just a passage to womanhood, “I knew that those who had *nirvaanam* . . . enjoyed a special status and were respected. But more than anything, I was eager to become a woman, and that was all that mattered to me” mentions Revathi (66). So compelling is the desire to be a woman that she undergoes the emasculation operation without realising the pain, ridicule and humiliation associated with it. Throughout the narrative, Revathi is struggling to establish her selfhood and accomplish her dreams and desires despite all the hardships, violence and ridicule.

On the other hand, Laxmi, the protagonist of *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* is born and brought up as Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (Raju) in a conservative high-class Brahmin family of Gorakhpur, living in Mumbai. She remembers herself as a feeble, shy and sick boy, always being protected by the unconditional love of her parents. Laxmi experiences a dichotomy in her personality but, unlike Revathi, hardly ever feels trapped inside the wrong body. Her childhood memories consist of several unpleasant incidents. She is often ridiculed and addressed as “a homo and a chakka” because of her feminine disposition and her love for dancing. She mentions, “In patriarchal, misogynistic cultures such as ours, dancing is seen as

a womanly pursuit. So I was teased” (Me 4). She does find herself effeminate as compared to other boys of her age, “But why was it so? I did not know. I wasn’t of the age to answer this question” she recalls (4). The trauma and agony of sexual assault at the age of seven by a cousin stays in her psyche forever and plays a crucial role in shaping her personality. The most disturbing fact is that she gets sexually exploited by her family members, which gradually results in her getting into the dirty world of sex playing in society. This snatches her innocence and matures her before time, making her “secretive and incommunicative.” She hides her sufferings, bafflement and plight of having feminine feelings, inside her biologically male body, from her family and friends. This anomaly in her personality keeps troubling her young mind, but she carries on with life on her terms and conditions and constantly tries to identify her true self. The yearning to know her true self is so compelling that in grade four she manages to meet Ashok Row Kavi, the Gay activist, and feels great on learning that she is not abnormal but gay. But this happiness doesn’t last for long. Her femininity differentiates her from gays, “That alienated me from them. I wondered why they did not regard themselves as women, for, to me, then, being homosexual and being a woman meant the same thing . . . but when I was attracted to a man, I did not think of myself as a man. I thought of myself as a woman” she mentions (29). She keeps shifting on the gender spectrum from being a gay to a drag queen and simultaneously continues with her studies and dance school. Her life takes a turn after meeting Shabina, a hijra, “I had suffocated all along. I had been a victim of the wrongful assumptions of the world. Till I met Shabina and got answer to all my questions” she recalls (40). She realizes that hijras are neither men nor women and completely identifies with them. In 1998 she joins the hijra community without the knowledge of her parents. She continues to be the dutiful son to her parents by offering them a part of her earnings from her dance school and model coordinator’s job. She is happy with her newfound selfhood and starts internalizing hijra culture and tradition. On realizing her decision to stay as a hijra, her parents try their level best to change her mind but ultimately accept her the way she is. Throughout the narrative, Laxmi is struggling to strengthen her selfhood and identity, which builds up her character and gives her a sense of empowerment to exercise rights. Her life narrative traces the journey of her transformation from a shy, sick boy to a glamorous dancer and a determined and articulate hijra activist who continues to share her responsibilities as a dutiful son in mainstream society.

Social Location and Struggles of Selfhood in the Given Narratives:

Laxmi and Revathi's distinct social locations, class, caste and gender affect their struggles of selfhood and ultimately, the trajectory of their lives to a great extent. Both the narratives are similar in terms of tracing incredible journeys of physical trauma, emotional upheaval, unrest, disappointments, struggles and achievements of the protagonists but are very different at the same time. Whereas Laxmi finds herself normal and talks about her bitter experiences of sexual harassment openly, Revathi feels guilty about being born as gender incongruous individual in an already oppressed backward class. Revathi's narrative depicts her struggle for survival and making her selfhood visible in a heteronormative society, where she is victimised, ridiculed and abused by everyone because of her caste and gender. On the other hand, Laxmi talks about herself as a flesh and blood person with a visibly strong sense of selfhood and highlights her struggle for power and status in mainstream society. Laxmi's dominant and privileged class background wields a great deal of power and gives her a sense of superiority and confidence. Although she doesn't have a smooth life, she certainly has someone to look up to in her times of distress. She gets support from her family, which further strengthens her selfhood to resist discrimination and fight for her rights. Revathi, in contrast, feels marginalized from multiple directions and struggles to access things everyone has access to. She is humiliated, ridiculed and abused both by her family and society. Located at the intersection of caste, class and gender, Revathi struggles hard for her selfhood and survival and accepts the violation of her bodily integrity by the unjust patriarchal society.

Laxmi takes up the role of a dutiful son and a fierce hijra activist to establish her selfhood as a human being who has the female gender in the biologically male body. She achieves her selfhood by resolving her conflicts through self-exploration and focusing her attention on her innate nature. She tries to identify herself with gays, drag queens and hijras on the gender spectrum and finally identifies with hijras. She decides to join the hijra community not because she has nowhere to go or wants to opt for nirvana but because she identifies with them as "neither a man nor a woman." She embodies the true spirit of a hijra in the sense that she continues to have the masculine characteristics of Raju and the feminine traits of Laxmi. Raju is an inseparable part of Laxmi's selfhood. Instead of curbing her desires and being known as an effeminate homosexual guy, she asserts her selfhood by becoming a hijra. She does not opt for nirvana because she feels happy the way she is. She feels one isn't hijra because of one's attire or the act of castration, "it is the soul which is a

hijra.” This enhances her selfhood and makes her, what Raj Rao calls, an “anti-essentialist” (Afterword 187). She decides to nurture the choices that are consistent with her true self and gets in harmony with herself and with everything around her. Laxmi confidently comes out with her selfhood and makes sure not to be victimized because of her gender preference. She accepts herself the way she is and makes every possible effort for others to accept her selfhood. Laxmi is fortunate to have a loving family and friends around her. Their love, concern and care play a crucial role in what she is today. She mentions, “In my case, the bright side was the love I got from my parents, teachers and friends” (28). Once she identifies herself on the gender spectrum, she tries to get the best out of everything. She hardly complains about her sufferings and never lets her emotions overpower her decisions. She never considers her gender disposition as a hindrance in her daily life. She strikes a balance between her biological and hijra family and decides to stay with her parents as a dutiful son, “If we can be hijras without shaming our families what’s the harm in that?” She mentions (73). This is her selfhood.

Revathi, in contrast, joins the hijra community to give voice and expression to her selfhood. With a great deal of perseverance, she makes her invisible selfhood visible by getting her true self to the fore. Her desire to be true to her inner femininity or womanhood lays the foundation for the flourishing of her selfhood. By changing herself physically, she tries to align her inner self with her biological body and give expression to her selfhood. She spends her childhood days struggling to break through the rigid compartments of the gender binary system. Ultimately at the tender age of 18, she dares to undergo an emasculation operation to liberate her true self from the trap of the stifling male body to establish her selfhood. She dreams to be a woman but ends up being a hijra after the emasculation operation. She accepts it and takes it as a step towards her identity construction and strengthening of selfhood. She reflects, “May be if gender perspective and perceptions of the mainstream were more flexible and accommodating of difference we would be able to find other ways of ‘finding’ ourselves” (Life 35). As the narrative progresses, she evolves as a person and starts raising her voice against the conventional norms imposed by the patriarchal society. She argues, “We want to live as women . . . We were not born to beg or do sex work. Circumstances, faulty laws and social hatred have left us with no course but to beg and do sex work. Our parents begot us like they did other children. We are also human” (Truth 262). She keeps enduring the pain and torturous life of prostitution and begging with the hope to have a brighter future with her newfound selfhood. She says, “I am not diseased. I consider myself a

woman. But I possessed the form of a man. I want to rid myself of that form and live as a complete woman. How can that be wrong” (262)? The moment she gets an opportunity to work with an NGO, she grabs it. It widens her perspective and adds a new dimension to her selfhood. Her growth as a person is exceptional. Her experiences reinforce her selfhood to such an extent that she tries to bridge the gap between the hijra community and society by giving expression to her lived experiences. She hopes that it will “initiate a dialogue; . . . make people see the interconnections; to underscore the fact that as humans we have to fulfil our sense of individual and collective responsibility” (Life 79). Her life narrative also plays a crucial role in accentuating her selfhood.

Revathi’s life narrative is a grim tale of a hijra’s life that belongs to a relatively backward class and caste in India. The non-acceptance of gender non-conforming individuals by patriarchal families and society forces them to run away from the safe environment of their respective homes and live with the hijra community. Revathi leaves the constricted environment of her home and joins the hijra house to explore her feminine identity. Her parents fail to give her love and support because of their prejudiced mindset and marginalized position in society. The constant fear of being ostracised from society, lack of social security, feelings of shame, lack of awareness and education keep them from doing the same. Revathi’s father, who feels oppressed because of his backward class, has no strength to face another humiliation because of his child’s gender expression. On the contrary, Laxmi’s repetitive reference to family lineage emphasises her strong sense of heritage (Me 37,137), making her a privileged hijra. Her upper class and high caste background act as a protective shield and play a crucial role in the course of her life. Her Brahmin family proves to be a boon to her that resists her from being discriminated against. Laxmi stays with her family and completes her post-graduation. Her supportive parents come to terms with her gender expression. They accept her the way she is rather than leaving her on the streets to beg and trade her body. This acceptance saves her from the harshness of the outside world. Her father, unlike Revathi’s, takes a stand to support Laxmi, irrespective of the consequences. It may be because of his social location and his being a high caste Brahmin living in Mumbai that contributes to his relatively accepting mindset. Moreover, Mumbai being a metropolitan city, houses people of progressive mindset compared to the orthodox people of a small taluk of Tamil Nadu, where Revathi resides. S.K. Sharma in *Hijras: The Labelled Deviants* observes that hijras born in urban areas may escape the stigma and their subsequent departure for a considerable long time because of impersonal life style, compared to the ecological structure

of villages where society is close knit and all sorts of information is disseminated and discussed (34-35). Laxmi's father respects her decision by saying, "My child is not handicapped, my child is not mentally challenged, my child is different, his sexuality is different and that doesn't bother me" (Red 19). Belonging to a high-class Brahmin family where such a thing was unheard of, he could have disowned her, but he accepts her and dares to stand with his child. The same thing would have been ridiculed and discouraged had it been done by a person from a rural area or lower class and caste because they are the suppressed ones and are answerable to society. They would be ostracized or excommunicated from society for taking such a step. With little scepticism, it may be assumed that social location of individuals has a direct bearing on struggles of selfhood in the lives of hijras. The rural and urban background, family's class and caste status and other correlates affects an individual's struggles in achieving selfhood.

Conclusion:

Both the narratives lucidly reflect that the social location of individuals changes the whole perspective and outlook of that person and society. The different approaches of the two families in dealing with their gender-atypical children may be attributed to their social location as it greatly influences people's thought processes, perceptions and understanding. Laxmi's educated, understanding and loving family looks at her choice from her perspective and accepts her without much trouble. On the contrary, the social location of Revathi's family generates an altogether different outlook on her gender expression and considers her as one who brought shame to the family. Social locations definitely affect their struggles and the trajectories of their lives in terms of their experiences and quality of life. Laxmi's struggle is absolutely at a different level compared to Revathi. Her struggles are not for survival but equality, power and status of her selfhood. Although Revathi establishes herself as an activist, actor and writer, still her life is full of challenges and problems, and so is the life of others like her. Laxmi enjoys the status of a celebrity as an activist and as the Mahamandaleshwar of kinnar akhada. The Social location of individuals becomes crucial in their struggle for existence within a system based on class, caste, gender and patriarchy. In contemporary times hijras are stigmatized, ridiculed and ostracised and at the same time treated with respect, depending upon their social location. Legally they have been granted the status of the third gender with all fundamental rights. But it is said, "Changing laws is one thing, and changing mindset is another." The dignity of hijras will only come with changing attitudes and mindsets of people.

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