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Embodying Identity: The Centrality of the Body in Trans Stories

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Abstract:

Transgender individuals express their resistance against traditional gender and sexual norms through their writing, placing a significant emphasis on the body in their narratives. In today's society, transgender individuals are undergoing various forms of transition, ultimately resulting in a transformation of their physical body. A. Revathi's narrative, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, illustrates how bodily transition impacts an individual's societal place. This will be examined through Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, highlighting how a changed body becomes a target of mistreatment due to its non-conformity with societal norms.

Keywords: Transgender, Performativity, transition, non-conformity, body, trans stories.

Hijras, a prominent yet paradoxically invisible subgroup within India's transgender community, are a familiar sight on the streets. Begging at traffic lights, shops, and other public spaces, they are often recognizable by their distinctive appearance and mannerisms. They are also known to perform at weddings and celebrations for newborns, highlighting their complex and multifaceted role in Indian society. Gayatri Reddy, in her book *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, says, " In recent years, hijras have emerged as perhaps the most frequently encountered figures in the narrative linking of India with sexual difference"(2). In one of the most explicit accounts of transgender people in India, Reddy defines hijras as " Phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation...dedicated to the goddess Bedhraj Mata. Subsequently, they are believed to be endowed with the power to confer fertility on

newlyweds or newlyborn children" (2). Stating the traditional role of hijras, Reddy also confirms that "at least half of the current hijra population engages in prostitution" (2).

For centuries, the community has sought to amplify its voice, but through the powerful tool of life writing, their marginalized stories have finally gained recognition and understanding. This poignant form of activism has provided a platform for their experiences to be shared, heard, and acknowledged.

A. Revathi is one of the most prominent figures of the transgender rights movement in India. Revathi's book *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* is an autobiography. In her book, Revathi provides a detailed account of her life, representing the experiences of many transgender individuals in India. Born as Doraiswamy, Revathi realized very early in her childhood that her gender identity was different from the one assigned to her at birth. As a male child, Doraiswamy enjoyed all the privileges such as education and comfort, while his elder brothers had to work alongside their father after leaving their studies incomplete. Doraiswamy, feeling like a woman in a man's body, often found himself doing domestic chores and loved cleaning the house, making *Kolam*, and sweeping the yard as women would do. At first, his responsibilities were disregarded as a child, and no one paid attention to his actions. One day, Doraiswamy participated in a temple festival at the Mariamman temple, where he danced as part of a tribute to the gods before the play began. He asked his neighbour to help him wear women's clothes and makeup. He danced so skilfully that the onlookers applauded and mistook him for a woman. For the first time, he found himself torn between the external world and his internal emotions. Revathi writes, "Reluctantly, I changed into my regular clothes. As I re-emerged in my man's garb, I felt that I was in disguise, and that I had left my real self behind" (16).

Gender, in Indian transgender narratives, moves in two dimensions - gender roles and gender identity. As Serena Nanda posits "The hijra role is a gender role, and for that reason, it is useful to look at the hijras in terms of their gender roles and gender identities... Gender identity is the private experience of gender roles, that sameness, unity, and persistence of one's individuality as male, female, or androgynous... Gender role is everything that a person says and does to indicate to others or to the self the degree that one is either male, female, or androgynous" (14).

Gender identity crisis took a critical shape in Revathi's life when unable to hold her feelings, she travelled to a hijra house with her newly found friends who shared like feelings.

The house welcomed all of them, and one of the elders accepted Doraiswamy as her chela (disciple). Following the custom, the elder handed over a sari to him and asked his female name while accepting him. Someone standing there said, “You look like actress Revathi” (22), and thus Doraiswamy transitioned to Revathi with hijra rituals. The actual transition was yet to be seen through her narrative.

Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, argues that gender is performative. According to Butler, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (25). The idea that there is nobody before its cultural inscription thus destabilizes the cultural given of a natural body. She says that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33).

In the present study, gender can be viewed as a performance of the body, where transgender narratives, such as Revathi's, often challenge established gender norms. Revathi faced numerous hardships before finding refuge in a hijra house in Delhi, where she learned about one of the primary professions within the hijra community - *badhaai*. Many hijras visit homes when a male child is born, and they also bless newlywed couples at weddings, asking for money in return for their blessings and dance. Since these occasions do not occur daily, hijras often go to shops to ask for money from the shopkeepers. In all cases, individuals are expected to dress and behave in a feminine manner, resembling a hijra, and are required to discard all masculine traits. Revathi was told by her guru that, “if born a pottai, and when living amongst pottais, it is important that a person pierces her ears and nose, and grows her hair. If you merely wear press-button earrings and a wig, no one really respects you. Likewise, if you happen to see a man crossing your path, you're expected to make way to him, bend your head bashfully, and make sure that your chest is covered” (47).

After begging in shops like most of her community members, Revathi shifted to Mumbai, where, unlike Delhi, many of the community members also engaged in sex work. Her guru's guru, known as Nani, presided over a large household and operated a brothel. Hijras who did *badhaai* did not get involved in sex work and so Revathi was initially away from it. Her new guru arranges for her sex change operation, better known as *nirvana* in the hijra community. Some hijras undergo castration, either performed by another hijra known as *thayamma* or by a doctor. This body transition sometimes leads to life loss in some hijras who

fail to bear the pain and blood loss during the former one, but the ones who survive enjoy high respect in the community house. Revathi was sent for the latter one and travelled for the operation with another hijra. The process involves removing the male reproductive organ from the body and creating a vaginal structure, resulting in a more aligned body image and a reaffirmation of one's gender identity.

When the two returned to the community house, they were warmly welcomed. A ceremony was held on the fortieth day of the operation in the community house, where a large number of hijras from all over were gathered. Both of them were then anointed with mehndi and turmeric. They were then given a *jok*, which comprises “a green sari, a blouse and an inner skirt, and a nose ring, anklets, and toe rings.” The ritual involves a *puja* where both individuals are required to worship the goddess who has granted them a new life as a woman. All the rituals emphasize the significance of embracing the female gender, and these things hold special importance for women

Revathi once again leaves the house to seek refuge in another household engaged in sex work. These houses employed women for sex work but also allowed hijras who passed as women, “for people came to this place looking for women” (131). In the modern world, Revathi was instructed to wear contemporary clothing to attract clients. She soon started wearing jeans, and skirts instead of sarees. With the money she earned through sex work, she often visited beauty parlours to look more attractive and learned how to talk to clients “in a voice and tone that did not give away that I [she] was a hijra” (134).

To pass as a woman for sex work, Revathi asks her guru how to acquire breasts as some of her clients who came to her “thinking I was a woman, sometimes got to find out that I did not have breasts” (142). To address this issue, Revathi received hormone pills, and her mentor informed her that these pills were from Singapore. In a month Revathi acquires breasts of “satisfactory size” (142). Revathi has tried her best to pass as a woman.

Back at home, Revathi again participates in the temple festival, but this time as a woman. She wore a silk saree and asked to carry the rice lamps that only women were supposed to carry. Once in the festival, Revathi became a sight of attention and women complimented her for her beauty, “Super Revathi! You look very beautiful. In the silk sari and with all that jewelry you look like a real woman” (165). While women adored her beauty, men were sure that she was a real woman and bet on her. Revathi was happy as she took, “their interest as a victory of her femininity” (165). When Revathi danced at the festival, everyone thought her to

be a girl from the theatre troupe that was to perform at the festival. Revathi indeed passed as a woman at this stage of her life where she had adorned and performed her gender with every step in her life's journey.

Revathi's other exploration came when she tried to leave sex work and joined a public bath house – *hamam*- in Bangalore city. Several hijras resided here and offered to fetch water and even massage the client's body in return for some meagre amount of money. Revathi's *chela*, whom she had accepted in her previous house, was also living here and was engaged in sex work as she “looks like a woman and passes off as one in the outside world” (189) Revathi was told, “If you can't pass for a woman, not a chap will look at you” (190). Revathi was asked to engage in sex work because her earnings from working at the bathhouse were not enough to support herself. Additionally, the elders living in the house were finding it difficult to manage everyone's needs. One of her elders says, “How are you going to make a living? If we were like you if we were only pretty, as feminine, we'd earn plenty of money. Just like that” (201). Revathi's successful passing as a woman again attains momentum here.

In a later part of the story, Revathi becomes tired of the trauma and abuse she experienced while trying to make a living. This included begging on the streets and doing sex work. She decides to leave that behind and takes a job as an office assistant at an NGO. Revathi, like many working women, moved to a private home and left the communal bath. She joined Sangama to amplify her voice and the voices of others like her.

In her narrative, one would come across Revathi's successful attempts to pass as a woman, but her gender identity assigned to her at the time of birth never actually leaves her. Gender reassignment surgeries in India were performed without adequate pre- or post-medical support, often only involving castration. In other countries, there is a proper medical procedure followed for sex reassignment. Counselling sessions are done to make sure that the person is fit for the surgery, hormone therapies are given to make the body womanlier, and the surgeries are carried out under the supervision of doctors who specialize in the field. Multiple surgeries are performed to ensure a successful transition. In Revathi's case, she was given money by her guru and was sent off for the operation with one more person who was also going to get the operation done. Revathi was operated on and was not given any proper supervision even after the operation.

Operations like these free one from the male organ, but do not let one transition completely into a woman. Signs of manliness, like facial hair, voice, and masculine stature, are

still to be carried by the one who transitions. For members of the hijra community, “a deviant body is often simultaneously a reflection of identity and self-determination, and a source of marginalisation” (Zimman 166).

This half transition often exposes trans individuals to abjection. “Abjection refers to the vague sense of horror that permeates the boundary between the self and the other. In a broader sense, the term refers to the process by which identificatory regimes exclude subjects that they render unintelligible or beyond classification.” Following Julia Kristiva’s idea of the abject in her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* thus when Transgender bodies when viewed “as physical bodies in transition, defy the borders of systematic order by refusing to adhere to clear definitions of sex and gender... the anxiety at the root of this unease with transgender subjectivity can be traced back, in part, to a fear of the ambiguous.” (Phillips)

Abject carries negative connotations of being cast out and left aside. Abjection plays a crucial role in marginalizing the ones who fall out of the social order and transgenders have always been these subjects. Based on their gender performance, transgenders face multiple forms of violence daily. Revathi, in her narrative, recounts the incidents that were the results of her gender identity epitomized through her body. Once, while traveling in a bus, Revathi says, “The man sitting behind would deliberately lean over and fall all over my back... some other would call out “Macchan! Bus’ll reach at nine o’clock!” (172). Words like these are often used to insult transgender people in public areas. Humiliation does not end with only words in transgender person’s life. Even a private space like one’s own house does not provide a sigh of relief in the present narrative. Upon discovering Revathi’s gender identity, her brothers frequently subjected her to physical abuse. When they suspected she was involved in a romantic relationship, they expressed their disapproval, “You *pottai* motherfucker. You’re a man, after all. . . if we hear that he’s [Revathi’s partner] vising you again, be sure that we’ll tear his guts out and make a garland out of them! We will finish you off as well” (184). Such situations often led Revathi to take refuge in the hijra community house, far from her home and family.

Revathi defines her daily life in Bangalore where humiliation in the public spaces was her routine, “when I went to buy groceries and vegetables in the vegetable market, people sometimes threw rotten tomatoes at me” (193). Even the spaces that stand for public safety became unsafe for Revathi when she was picked up by a policeman and taken to a police station. She says, “he kicked me with his boots. He then asked me to take my clothes off- right there, while the prisoner was watching. . . when I was standing naked, he stuck his lathi where

I'd had my operation and demanded that I stand with my legs apart, like a woman would" (206). Sumedha Pal in her article says, "While deaths of trans persons are more common than we think, there is no record of the loss of their lives" (web).

Transgender individuals often have to choose sex work to earn their living like women. Their profession exposes them to mental and physical abuse. Revathi recounts her encounters with people who had abused her while she was trying to earn a living. Once, while Revathi lived in a shack with her community members, a rowdy who was physically much stronger than Revathi, forced her into a sexual act. He held her and put a knife on her throat "I was hurting all over, and yet had to give in and do as he told me. The skin down there felt abraded, and I was bleeding" (108).

Revathi, in her narrative, not only faces oppression and violence but also comes up as an activist, where she uses her abject body as a site from where she writes her narrative. In the present milieu, transgender people and other marginalized groups use to channel their rage that arises from all the humiliation and violence that come their way and rechannels this rage towards "self-affirmation, intellectual inquiry, moral agency, and political action" (244). In the present narrative, the body is kept at the centre, with gender performativity observed at every stage.

This performativity rectifies Butler's idea of gender being a performance rather than a given. Transgenders often identify themselves with one cisgender category- male or female- and often perform their gender to pass as their chosen cisgender category. Hijras not only try to pass mostly as women, but through their bodies and acts, they also challenge the notions of normativity and heterosexuality giving way to a much broader spectrum.

Transgender people in India have come a long way in challenging the fixed norms of society, and narratives like that of Revathi help in understanding the hijra lives in depth. In his article "A Transformative Journey" Gaurav Jain says, "The community has scored many remarkable wins, translating into judicial legitimacy and social recognition and even making a mark in different walks of life" (7).

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