



A Comparative Study of the Underprivileged Subaltern - Trans Women through Gayathri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak* in A. Revathi's *Our Lives, Our Words*

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Abstract

In a world when women are still striving for equality, some chose this thorny road despite being born as a man. This article discusses the transgender population, in Tamilnadu, as the most double jeopardised and the reasons that foster it with relation to Gayatri Spivak's book *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. From a culture that once confounded sexual queerness with divinity, India has become a graveyard for transgender women's daily lives and dreams, whilst the rest of the world embraces them. Apart from the prejudices and obnoxious attitude towards trans women in Tamil culture, only a few people attempt to consider the reality behind their current situation. A. Revathi, a transgender activist and writer, eloquently documented the lives of transwomen in her book *Unarvum, Uyirum*. The book was then translated as *Our Lives, Our Words* by A. Mangai, raising international awareness of the perils that trans women face in South India. This paper applies Gayatri Spivak's theory of the west's portrayal of colonised,

to the dominant categories of the society and their objectification of trans women. With the facts provided in the book *Our Lives, Our Words* the article aims to deconstruct the state of affairs of transwomen in Tamil society and culture.

Keywords: Cultural feminism, Queer rights, The Other Gender, Transwomen's ostracizing, Double Marginalisation, Homophobia, Misogyny towards trans women.

Introduction

Transgender women are always looked down on or given the side eye just because they chose to be the way they felt in heart. They are despised, excommunicated, abused, robbed of their rights and are oppressed. Revathi's book *Our Lives, Our Words* is the collective voice of all the trans women across South India who have not been heard before. As a Transgender activist, writer and performer Revathi has brilliantly categorised the lives of several transgenders under different spectra of life as Childhood and Schooling, Parents and Society, Work, Love and Family Life, Hijra Mothers, Cultural Practices, Nirvanam, Activism and finally Change. Gayatri Spivak's theory of subaltern being robbed of their voice is accurately relatable to transwomen. Because if they do speak, they are not heard. Their clap represents not just their presence in a crowded area but also breaks the taboos, judgements and assumptions about them in the society. It is their war cry to change the monologue about them into a dialogue. In the article, "Communal Expectancy and the Authentic Self of Men and Transgenders - Arms and the Man by George Bernard Shaw and Birthday by Meredith Russo" the author Suganya et al. shares the insights on transgender's difficulties faced in the society as, "Transgender individuals face significant discrimination and marginalization, including lack of legal recognition and access to appropriate healthcare, harassment and violence" (Suganya et al. 882).

Manipulated Truths

Gayatri Spivak argues that although the British have established a visage of being the saviours who provided betterment to the Indian society, they did so without actually having Indians as their primary concern (web). She provides an example of how the British prohibited the practice of Sati not to help women in peril, but in the name of educating the 'uncivilized' Indians. The women are thereby expected to be grateful for the so called reformers,

when the main cause of their problems are not addressed. Similarly transwomen are deceived by some people, who offer to help and support them. Sudha Senthilkumar is one such victim of hypocritical acceptance. Her own father and brother tried poisoning Sudha, while her husband whom she loved wholeheartedly, betrayed her (Revathi,18). Another transwoman, Aruna who believed that she was being accepted in her home was beaten to death and was forced to behave like a man (20). Even when there are people who represent trans women, they form their own narratives of them rather than actually speaking out for them. Spivak explains this unreliability of external representation through Karl Marx's two types of representation. The first being *darstellen* and the next *verteran* (web). People in power belong to the *verteran* representation as they simply act as a facade of inclusivity. It often happens during elections when the politicians approach trans women with fake propagandas and seek their votes for their win, says transwoman Roja (29). But even in an outgoing place like Bengaluru, they are not provided any amenities properly. Throughout the world this is how women have been treated and it is double the trouble for trans women. In both the cases the self-proclaimed "protective figures" of the social institutions, like dad or brother in a family and a politician in government, pretend to support them just to establish their agency and later subject them to more suffering than before.

Knowledge Construction

Throughout the years colonisers have justified their evasion by saying that they have tamed the colonised by calling themselves mannered and the east as "uncivilised". Similarly the society judges trans women for their jobs, but ignores the real vultures who abuse their power and exploit the people under the guise of a white collared job. Tamil society as described in ancient literature used to assert certain rights to women that it was almost a neutral society. Spivak says, history leaves out subaltern (Spivak 41) that overtime the idea of an equal society was completely effaced from Indian society. It intensified when the westerners imbibed the idea of patriarchy and manipulated the world into associating female sex as the weaker one, which Spivak calls this the "epistemic violence" (36). Now they have moved on and left the wasteful thoughts for Indians to rot in making them inclusive and Indians as homophobic. The objectification of the developing countries as the "other" is exactly the same as how transgender genders are labelled as the "other gender". They are also called names in derogatory terms like "onpathu, aravani," etc. Indian mythology also has stories of transgender people like Aravan and Shikandi in

Mahabharata. Literature is basically inspired and influenced by the society of the time, which proves that Indian society accepted and even revered queerness as divinity. The translator Mangai also expresses her grievance of how overtime transgenders became the ‘Ahirinai’ (non-living object) in her translator's note (Mangai on her preface to OLOW xi).

Social Immobility

The judgmental society often fails to see that transwomen are often snatched of “all lines of social mobility”. They are not given a healthy environment to study. They are constantly abused by their peers and even teachers. Transwomen like Roja and Sundari were victims of sexual abuse at a very young age, even from their staff. Transwomen are forced to leave the house and are refused from inheriting any properties. They are not provided a decent job. Even if they do, they are abused in all manners. The superiors and people who work with them treat them as untouchables. If they are anyhow accepted by their superiors, they are expected to have a physical relationship with them in return by terming it as ‘gratitude’. They are susceptible to abuse in return for an acceptance as a normal human being at the cost of losing their honour. Aruna was trying to study even when she ran away from her house but the bullying she faced was so unbearable that she was forced to leave school (Revathi 12,13). Sundari had to quit her job because she was abused by her boss . Later she started begging in the streets of Mumbai, finally she had to feed herself by doing sex work (41). Even her earnings would be given to the place she stayed in. Santhi Amma and Rajini are dancers who used to love their jobs. Santhi Amma says “In those days we used to tie the saree the way *bharatanatyam* dancers do...Now the underwear has to be shown. People want glamour.” (36,37). Rajini expresses her grief by recalling instances when men would peep on them while changing. The same pretentious society which slut shames transwomen is the one that demands them to wear revealing clothes and perform provocatively when the transwomen want to work dedicatedly. They work sincerely but are paid much less compared to a man or a woman. The hypocritical society which blames them for begging or prostitution often fail to see that all the above mentioned factors hinder their social mobility.

Criticism of essentialist ideology

Sigmund Freud proposes the theory of anti-feminism by saying that a woman being weak is natural, hence it is essential for them to be submissive to the stronger sex. Spivak says that if the idea of women being weaker is normalised, there is no room for reform from inside the system (Rosalind 6). It has to be from an external factor without the dominant groups being the mouthpiece rather than the suppressed ones themselves. Spivak implores the society to help the voice reach out as she says, “work for the bloody subaltern ... against subalternity” (Spivak to de Kock in an interview on 1992). It is important for privileged people to let them speak and even to carry the message themselves. Spivak quotes the incident of Bhuvanewari’s suicide as “a situation where a subaltern had tried extremely hard to speak, to the extent of making her damned suicide into a message” (Spivak to de Kock in an interview on 1992). She had to prove her loyalty to a freedom association when she could not complete a political assassin she was assigned with. She also waited until her menstruation, since people often associated a woman’s suicide with unexpected pregnancy. Still the story was manipulated by her family that told public she committed suicide because she was ashamed of her love affair (280, 281). Since transwomen are opposed in every walks of life, they often resort to ending their life rather than to live with shame that society imposes on them. Even the author Revathi herself was driven to end her life once her husband left her. But she was saved by her friends and her responsibility to the world seemed to be her priority. Thankfully, she channeled her trauma into creating the masterpiece *Unarvum, Uyirum* which helped her relate her experience and all of the transgender community’s experience to the world. But it was not the case for all. Even among the trans women community in *Jamads*, there are rules that they must follow in order to be a part of the community. Although transwomen agree, “Why castrate? The mind is the major arbitrator” (Revathi 60) or regret, “Don’t ever make the same mistake we did, let our troubles end with us” (71), they need to undergo *nirvanam* in order to be accepted by the community. But if they transform they are being disowned by their families too. So they have no other refuge than these *jamads*. Sometimes they are even abused by the *Gurus* or *Chellas* who ritually own them. If they do not comply with the *Guru* and try to escape they are branded as disloyal and have to pay a penalty to the *Guru*. The innate misogyny also plays a major role in the indifferent treatment of transwomen.

Culture as a major hindrance in trans women's empowerment

Spivak argues that what we take to be common sense is often informed by our cultural background (Spivak 31). In a culture when masculinity is considered stronger and women are made to feel bad about their gender, the people are innately convinced that identifying with a different gender or sexuality other than that they are naturally born with is very deviant and abnormal. Rather than this being a natural phenomena, the culture imposes the idea of deviance which in itself is temporal as people in power manipulate the culture according to their own comfort. The article, "Gender Performance on the Reinvigoration via Food", the author Suganya et al. describes the optimistic role of women in the lives of men. The article focuses on the ways in which the act of women in relation to food offering, and consumption through empathic emotion regulation by women reinvigorates into an optimistic multicultural environment (Suganya et al. 883). As Spivak says, "subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (41), this paper further asserts that transwomen are doubly marginalised and muted. "Men use *hijras* only for sex. Only at that time do they treat *hijras* as women." (Revathi,72). When a man transforms or identifies himself as a woman, society considers her as weak and disgusting. Even being called feminine or wearing clothes or colours associated with women are considered shameful in Indian society. Since women were always considered inferior, the innate misogyny in men makes them deny the fact that trans women chose to be women. So when a man from their own sex associates themselves with the suppressed sex, it enrages the collective ego of men. This contributes to the aversive behaviour of men towards transwomen, which is not much prevalent among women towards transwomen. Some trans women like Gopal Amma and Rajini gave up their love life to other women believing that they do not deserve a normal marriage life like that of a woman since they are innately conditioned to think of themselves as incapable of bearing a child. From the lives of the transwomen in *Our lives, Our Tales*, it is observed that the men of the house were noticeably against their transformation. Although women were worried about the potential loss of a male heir, some gradually began accepting them. The lack of representation of transgender also contributes to the fear of losing an heir. Some parents like that of Aruna's, Kokila's and a lot others in the book, pleaded with them to behave and dress like a man at least before their relatives since they will be the ones who are held accountable. Some like Roja are afraid that they "would be teased if spotted in male clothes after

transformation” (30). This simply proves that even if the very own parents are okay with the transformation, they are also victims of the society’s fake culture.

Conclusion

Transgender do not ask to be accepted only for their gender identity. Rather they just want to be identified as a fellow human being because of the basic human rights that are denied for them. Some trans women who were able to achieve their dreams are willing to be addressed with their professional designation and their passion like any other adults. India proudly proclaims that there is “Unity in Diversity”. But only diversity is growing prevalent in terms of caste, community and gender. Being an Indian woman is a race for survival everyday. Thus when a person identifies themselves as a woman, when they have assigned another gender at birth, they are exposed to double marginalisation which is evident in A. Revathi’s *Our Lives, Our Words*.

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