



NARROWING THE GENDER DIVIDE: A STUDY OF SELECTED TRANS- AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Mandeep Kaur and Nancy

Department of English, CT University, Ludhiana, Punjab (India)

ABSTRACT

Transgender autobiographies offer an intimate look into the lived experiences, struggles, and triumphs of individuals who have traversed the landscape of gender identity. These narratives are vital not only for the transgender community but for a broader audience seeking to understand the intricacies of gender beyond the binary. Drawing from a rich tapestry of emotions, encounters, and insights, these memoirs provide a firsthand account of the challenges of societal expectations, medical transitions, personal revelations, and the quest for self-affirmation. Equally significant, they reveal the strength, resilience, and authenticity inherent in the journeys of transgender individuals. Such autobiographies have the power to reshape sociocultural perceptions, challenge prejudices, and advocate for more inclusive and informed policies. As testimonies of personal truth, they play an indispensable role in expanding the literary canon, promoting empathy, and advancing human rights discourse. This research paper explores the autobiographies of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A. Revathi, two prominent transgender activists from India, to gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by transgender individuals in the country. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiography, "Me Hijra, Me Laxmi," and A. Revathi's "The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story" provide invaluable insights into the personal and societal struggles of transgender individuals as they navigate issues of identity, discrimination, and acceptance.

Keywords: Transgender, gender identity, sexual identity and caste and discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Literature is the product of society, it holds the mirror to life by depicting the reality of life, political and historical events, social reformation, social issues, and many other aspects. Literature records the life of all strata of society whether they are high in status or marginalised. Though Literature does not keep records of marginalised society yet, it does reflect the impact of struggles on its life. One such field which found a place in literature is 'Gender Studies.' Gender identity refers to how a person identifies himself as male and female or sometimes between these identities. In 1871, the Criminal Tribes Act was passed in India which talks about those people who are assigned male at birth, and a female called intersex, Transgender people (whose gender identity does not match with their sex assigned at birth), and even crossdressers. Gender is a socially constructed role that is performed by individuals. Susan Stryker wrote "no one is born a woman or a man rather, as the saying goes, *"one becomes one" through a complex process of socialisation*" (Stryker 11). In the above quote, Stryker explained

the idea of gender as a performance. She says that the roles performed in society are repetitive and through these roles, gender is determined. Kardam states that sex is a biological trait of an individual, and gender is an action that is related to the biological status of men. Kardam's statement is supported by Priya Laxmi in her research paper entitled *"Sex is a biological categorisation primarily based on reproductive capabilities, gender is socially constructed by defining specific gender roles to the male and female"* (Priya 52). Identity is another aspect in which the writer is trying to connect readers with themselves, what common things they have, and how they are unique and different. Identities are constructed rather than fixed and it is a process of social interaction. In addition to this, Embodiment plays a pivotal role because it is a storehouse where knowledge is stored. memory is also embodied because narrators are embodied subjects who narrate the whole story to the readers. Flashback is another important aspect in which the narrator moves the audience from the present moment in a chronological narrative to a scene in the past. Lastly, they have the liberty to narrate their tales, authors become agents, and their writings are acts of agency. Cultural scripts always constrain agency, just as human people are limited by ideas and institutions that surround them.

Discussion

This research paper explores the autobiographies of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A. Revathi, two prominent transgender activists from India, to gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by transgender individuals in the country. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiography, "Me Hijra, Me Laxmi," and A. Revathi's "The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story" provide invaluable insights into the personal and societal struggles of transgender individuals as they navigate issues of identity, discrimination, and acceptance. The paper begins by delving into the life of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a well-known transgender

rights activist, and performer. Her autobiography presents a candid account of her journey, offering readers a glimpse into the complexities of gender and sexuality. The analysis highlights Laxmi's unwavering determination to be true to herself and her significant role in promoting transgender rights and awareness in India. A. Revathi's autobiography, on the other hand, tells the story of a transgender woman who hails from a marginalized community, providing a unique intersectional perspective. Her narrative sheds light on the challenges faced by transgender individuals at the intersection of caste and gender discrimination in India. The paper underscores the importance of acknowledging these intersecting forms of discrimination and advocates for a more inclusive approach to transgender rights advocacy. Through a comparative analysis of these autobiographies, this research paper seeks to explore the common themes, struggles, and triumphs shared by these two remarkable individuals. It highlights the resilience and courage displayed by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A. Revathi as they navigate societal norms and prejudices while striving for self-acceptance and recognition.

In the Postmodern world, many are born as neither men nor women because of natural freaks, these are terms “*Third Gender*” they are either born as a male who finds some female characteristics inside them or as women who find male qualities in them. This makes their gender different from their sex. Chris Beasley in his work “*Gender and Sexuality*” wrote, “*Gender typically refers to the social process of dividing up people and social practices like sexed identities*” (Beasley 1).

Some people feel that they are trapped in the wrong bodies and go through operations to change their sex. These are called “*Transsexuals*,” However, those who are not in favour to change their sex are called ‘Transgender, which is common in the world. They have transphobia about them. They are afraid of transgender people because of society’s norms (Jack 1).

Jack says that society demarcated them as far from normal beings. However, In the present scenario, the condition has been changed. Now, many transgender secure high positions like doctors, teachers, and representative members of UNO. In 2014, the Supreme Court of India declared transgender as “*Third Gender*”, hence they gained their new identity (Jack 2). The term third gender was introduced in 1975 by M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies who employed it to draw attention to the ethnographic evidence that gender categories in some cultures could not be explained with a two-gender framework (Towle 668). This shows that there is a need to think beyond this binary system. Gender identity is a crucial aspect in the present scenario, although, it existed since prehistoric times.

Jack Scobey in his article’ “*Third Gender: A Short History*,” wrote that from 385-380 BC, there was a Greek Philosopher, Plato who Writers 'Symposium' a series of love speeches in which Aristophanes talked about three genders- male, female, and androgynous (male and female) (Scobey 2).

“*Being female or being male is a part of everyone's social identity from birth till death. Gender is at the core of what we are*” (Stoller 9). Stoller opines that social identity in society is determined by gender. Gender is neither fixed by birth nor it is associated with sex. It is also something related to the actions of individuals. This statement is also supported by Ramya in her thesis “*A study of the lives of transgender women*

in *I Am Vidya: A transgender's journey, Truth About Me A Hijra Life Story Crossing A Memoir and No Man's land*” supports Stroller's views and makes a clear distinction between gender and sex, “*Gender is a set of social/behavioural norms that are expected to be adhered to by a male or female, sex is determined by the physical features such as sex organs and the physiological alternations observed due to hormonal changes.*” (Ramya 5).

She emphasises the view that sex is physical, but gender is constructed by the roles. This has been supported by Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The second sex* which makes the distinction clear between gender and sex. Beauvoir defines that “*sex is a biological category whereas gender is the cultural interpretations of sex*” (Bhardwaj 1).

Queer theory is a literary and cultural approach to study that opposes established gender and sexuality categorisation. It is a response to a philosophy of feminism from the 1970s that claimed each sex had its basic quality. Teresa de Lauretis' 1991 article “*Queer theory*” in the feminist cultural studies magazine “*difference*” gave rise to the phrase “*queer theory.*” Lesbian & Gay sexualities Queer team's genesis is held in LGBT.

According to Annamarie Jagose, “*Once the term 'Queer' was, at best, slang for a gay person, at worst, a term of homophobic abuse. In recent years 'Queer' has come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model. Which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies.*” (Jagose 1)

Initially, this term was used for same-sex attraction as an abusive because people did not accept same-sex relationships in the initial period, however, in the current scenario, it has different meanings, it is used for marginalised sexual minorities as well as to describe a nascent theory which means that this term developed from gay and lesbian studies. It is a field of poststructuralist critical theory that emerged out of feminism and gender studies in the 1990s. “*Queer makes both a continuity and a break with previous gay liberationist and lesbian Feminist models.*” (Jagose 75)

“*For Queer theorists 'Queer' can note a crossing of boundaries, transgression of norms, and the failure to fit expected categories.*”(Bhardwaj 16). When Queer came into existence LGBT community got a new identity as queer means ‘strange’ and ‘odd. Now, they become free from some labels such as Gay, Homosexual, etc. The main emphasis of queer theorists is on those people who fail to fit into binary categories that are fixed by society and want to break this categorisation.

In ancient and medieval India there are same-sex love examples are visible, such as in the Hindu epic, Mahabharata, Arjuna, and Krishna's friendship is an example of this category, however, their bond of friendship is much more than marriage and procreation. During the medieval period, Gods were seen as friends, lovers, spouses, and even a child. In the modern era, writers of Hindi, and English, languages wrote about Queer literature. The first debate on homosexuality in 1920 takes place when Ismat Chughtail's story “*Lihaaf*” was published. R. Raj Rao claims, “*my work has been consistently queer since I published my first collection of short stories, one day I looked my flat in soul city, in 1995*” (Bhardwaj 26).

The word 'Autobiography' was first used by Robert Southey in 1809 in Quarterly Review. It is the act of depicting life systematically. In this genre, a person talks about his past in chronological order. The British poet presented it as "*the story of one's life written by himself*" (Smith1). It is a document that paints the picture of the writer's personality and time that is related to him. William Dilthey defines "*Autobiography as the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life comes before us*" (Smith 1). Smith explains that an autobiography is a document in which information regarding someone's life is obtained. It is an effortless way to know about events, faiths, beliefs, and experiences of life. There are two writers Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A. Revathi who narrated their experience as a transgender. Laxmi is a pivotal person in the transgender community. In Mumbai, India, she works as a transgender rights activist, Bollywood actor, Bharatnatyam dancer, choreographer, and motivational speaker, all of which led her to write about her experiences. In 2008, she was the first transgender person to represent Asia-Pacific in a UN task meeting, and she did it again at the 20th worldwide AIDS conference in Melbourne. Born in Thane, Mumbai, on December 13, 1978. She graduated from Bim's paradise in Kopri, Thane, with a Bharatanatyam postgraduate degree and an arts degree at Mithibai College. In 2011, she was a regular on the famous reality show Big Boss. Shabira, India's first Ph.D. trans student, introduced her to the hijra community. In 2002, she was elected president of the DAI Welfare Society, the first recognised and operational eunuch organisation in South Asia. She founded the "*Astitiva*" organisation and wrote works to support the rights of sexual minorities. She was one of the numerous petitioners in the momentous Supreme Court decision establishing the Third Gender. She also appeared in Rajveer Khandelwal's "*Sach Ka Samna,*" Salman Khan's "*Loka Dum,*" and "*Raaz pichle Janam ka.*" Between the lines, she also started in an award-winning documentary: She was a member of the Ministry of Social Justice as well as Empowerment's steering core committee for transgender rights as well as a core member of the aging committee for the transgender person's right to education. Her first book, "*Me Hijra Me Laxmi,*" provides insight into her life, while her second, "*Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life,*" "*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*" is an autobiographical book written by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a prominent transgender rights activist and performer in India. In this book, Laxmi shares her personal journey and experiences as a hijra, a term often used in South Asia to describe transgender individuals, hijras are often marginalized and stigmatized in Indian society.

The book provides a candid and intimate account of Laxmi's life, exploring her struggles, triumphs, and the challenges she faced as a transgender person. Laxmi's narrative sheds light on the complexities of gender identity and sexuality, and it advocates for greater awareness and acceptance of the transgender community in India. "*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*" is not only a personal memoir but also serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness about the issues faced by transgender individuals in India and promoting the rights and dignity of the hijra community. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's story and activism have played a significant role in advocating for transgender rights and challenging societal norms and prejudices. It discusses her unvarnished meetings with men in her life. In 2017, she was named "*Indian of the Year.*" Her first work *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, originally written in Marathi, and Gujarati, and converted into English by R. Raj Rao and P.G. Joshi. It tells the story of her decision to become a hijra and her subsequent quest for freedom for transgender rights, her childhood, how she becomes a famous dancer, and other events of her life. This is a work that represents the entire hijra community.

Laxmi is India's first transgender person to receive a passport. Moreover, it took the question of gender identity. How gender plays a pivotal role in living respectful life in society and how relationships become better or worse because of gender determination. In addition to it, the guru-chela relationship is beautifully presented here (Tripathi, "MHML"). Her second book *Red Lipstick: the men in my life* talked about all the men who played even a small role in Laxmi's life. It is divided into different sections which focus on different people in her life (Tripathi, "RL").

A. Revathi is another prolific transgender Activist and writer for the rights of sexual minorities. She is also transgender. Revathi was born in Tamil Nadu, and her name was Doraisamy at the time of her birth. She is a Bengaluru-based writer. In 2004, she released her debut book, "*Unarvum*" (our lives, our words), in Tamil. It is a true story collection of hijra people's experiences. Furthermore, feminist historian V. Geetha wrote "*The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*" in Tamil and translated it into English in 2010. "*A Life in Trans Activism*" is the second part of the autobiography in which she talks about her activist life. On October 1, 2019, 30 years after the women's student's protest, a new banner went up on the banner on Columbia university wall in which her name was written next to Maya Angelou and Tani Morrison. She was happy when she heard about this from her friend. "*The Truth About Me: A Hijra life story*" (2016) is an autobiographical work that explores the experience of a transgender boy, Doraiswamy. He left his school and started doing house chores, but his family is not supportive, they did not like their feminine behaviour. He finds himself as a cause of family shame, due to this he left his village and joined the transgender community. Apart from this, he talked about his problems with sex reassignment surgery, Guru Chela's relationship, and NGO Sangama where she works as an activist (Revathi, "TTAM"). "*A Life in Trans Activism*" (2016) is the second part of the autobiography, originally Nandini Murali authored the book in Tamil and converted it into English. In this book, she talks about her experience as an activist, problems faced during her work, and stories of some people who shared their experiences.

Conclusion

The autobiographies of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A. Revathi offer profound insights into the experiences and challenges faced by transgender individuals in India. These two narratives shed light on the deeply personal and often tumultuous journeys that transgender individuals undergo, as they grapple with societal norms, discrimination, and the struggle to find their own identities. Through these autobiographies, we gain a deeper understanding of the resilience, strength, and determination of transgender individuals in India. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiography, with its candid and unapologetic narrative, highlights the complexities of gender and sexuality. Laxmi's story reflects the courage it takes to be authentic and true to oneself in a society that often stigmatizes and discriminates against transgender individuals. Her journey serves as a testament to the power of self-acceptance and the importance of raising awareness about transgender rights. A. Revathi's autobiography provides an invaluable perspective from a transgender woman who experienced life at the intersection of caste and gender discrimination in India. Her story offers a unique insight into the challenges

faced by transgender individuals, particularly those belonging to marginalized communities. Revathi's narrative reinforces the need for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to transgender rights advocacy. In conclusion, the autobiographies of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A. Revathi serve as important sources of inspiration and education. They illuminate the diverse experiences within the transgender community and emphasize the importance of empathy, understanding, and advocacy in creating a more inclusive and accepting society. These narratives remind us that every transgender individual's journey is unique, and their stories deserve to be heard and respected. By studying these autobiographies, we can take meaningful steps toward creating a more inclusive and compassionate world for transgender individuals in India and beyond.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Revathi, A. *"A Life in Trans activism (ALIT)."* Zubaan, 2016.

Revathi, A. *"The Truth About Me- A Hijra Life Story (TTAM)."* Translated from Tamil by V. Geetha, Penguin Random house, 2010.

Tripathi, Laxminarayan. *"Me Hijra Me Laxmi (MHML)."* Translated from Marathi by R. Raja Rao and P.G. Joshi, Oxford University Press, 2015.

Tripathi, Laxminarayan. *"Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life (RL)."* Penguin Random House, 2016.

Secondary Sources

Bhardwaj Vandana. *"A Dissertation on The Plight of Transgender: Quest for Identity in The Narratives Me Hijra Me Laxmi and The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story,"* LPU, 2017, p. 16.

Bornstein, Kate and S. Bear, Bergman. *"Gender Outlaws: The Next Generations."* Routledge, 1994.

Butler, Judith. *"Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of The Identity."* Routledge, 2021.

Dasgupta. K. Rohit. *"Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narratives of India's Historical Archive."* p. 6.

Diaz-Guadalupe, L, Xavier. *"Transgressed."* New York university press, 2019.

Jagose, Annamarie. *"Queer Theory: An Introduction."* University Press, 1996, p. 1.

Kardam, Vishakha. *"Transgendered Self: The Expression"* An International Multidisciplinary Journal, vol. 3, no. 4, 2017, p. 12.

Lester, C. N. *"Trans Like Me: Conversations for All of Us."* Hachette UK, 2018.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. *"How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality."* Harvard University Press, 2002.

Priya, Lakshmi. *"Gaze, Power, and patriarchy: The politics of visibility in Transgender Life Writing."* Epitome: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, vol. 3, no. 4, 2017, p. 52.

Namaste, K. Viviane. *"Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgender People."* The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Nanda, Serena. *“Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India.”* Wadsworth Publishing, 1998, p. 21.

Roy, Pascal. *“Design and Truth in Autobiography.”* Routledge, 1960, p. 20.

Scobey, Jack. *“Third Gender: A Short History.”* Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 2.

Sidonie, Smith and Julia Watson. *“Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narrative.”* University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 1.

Sinha, R.C.P. *“The Indian Autobiographies in English.”* Delhi press, 1973, p. 2.

Stryker, Susan. *“Transgender History.”* Seal Press, 2008, p. 11-13.

Subapriya, K. *“Unveiling the Crisis of Transgender in India: A Study of Living Smile Vidya’s Autobiography.”* Veda’s Journal of English Language and Literature, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, p. 64.

