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Hijra Autobiographies and the Failure of the Anthropological Interpretative Model

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Abstract:

Currently, there are no critical models available to study hijra discourse. Serena Nanda's landmark anthropological text, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, published in 1999 remains the only interpretative guide to discuss hijra identity and the community. In light of four published autobiographies by hijra authors from 2001 to 2015, how relevant is the anthropological model today? This paper employs the autobiographical texts to read against the grain of generalized descriptions and sweeping conclusions drawn by Nanda about the subaltern community. The paper compares anthropological formulations with hijra authors' claims in order to critique and address the inadequacies of the former. The paper attempts to analyze the complexities of lived hijra reality (as narrated by autobiographers) to explore the cleavage between assumptions made by Nanda's enduring scholarship, and contemporary voices from the community that deconstruct those.

Keywords: Hijra, Transgender, Autobiography, Anthropology.

There are only five known autobiographies published by Indian hijra writers. The first autobiography was written by Delhi based Mona Ahmed in the form of collected emails and photographs. Ahmed dictated episodes from her life story to photo artist, Dayanita Singh who also captured her muse in varied poses and scenarios. The result was a glossy coffee table book interspersed with Ahmed's words juxtaposed against black and white images by Singh. The dynamic text shifts from Singh's cool professional gaze posturing as familiarity to Ahmed's candid confessions including reminiscences and regrets. Published from Zurich, *Myself Mona Ahmed* came out as late as 2001 and was clearly a literary product of a newly liberalized Indian economy. An exotic sexual outcast explained through visual-cum-textual material that offsets tasteful sensationalism could have appealed to booksellers both abroad and India.

After Ahmed, a long gap persists in the publication of autobiographies. It was not until 2006 that Jereena from Kerala would write her autobiography titled, *Oru Malayali Hijadayude Athamakatha* (Life Story of a Malayali Hijra), which is yet to be translated from Malayalam into any other language. In 2007, Living Smile Vidya

from Chennai compiled her blog posts and added other aspects of her story in an autobiography titled, *I am Vidya*. Another Tamil writer, A. Revathi wrote a more detailed account of her life titled, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* in 2010. More recently in 2015, prominent hijra activist from Mumbai, Laxminarayan Tripathi released the English translation of her 2012 autobiography, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, originally composed in Marathi. In 2016, both Revathi and Tripathi released second autobiographical texts. This paper however, focuses on their debut works. Several media reports have dubbed each new autobiographical work upon its release, as the first of its kind. The poverty of hijra discourse is self-evident in this suspended act of continued interpellation as little more than novelty. Before Ahmed, hijra discourse did not exist apart from snatches of interviews in popular media, documentaries, or through other mainstream representation like Bollywood films. More unfortunate than the lack of un-interceded hijra texts is perhaps, the lack of critical voices within contemporary postcolonial research. Hijra autobiography is commented upon in a handful of scholarly essays, which seem to emphatically offer benevolent ideas about hijra inclusion in Indian society by customarily focusing on the key messages of the works (Abraham; Kodad and Kazi).

A few oral histories were recorded and analyzed by anthropologist Serena Nanda earlier in 1999 in her landmark anthropological study *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Before Nanda, hijra story as testimony had received a sympathetic treatment by Zia Jaffrey in her 1998 book *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* that perhaps, exemplify extended human-interest journalism. However, it was Nanda who provided an overarching interpretative model to read hijra identity, which has remained more or less unchallenged till date. In 2005, anthropologist Gayatri Reddy both critiqued and extended Nanda's project. She provided a more in-depth and localized study of Hyderabad hijra and kothi communities but went on to organize and limit hijra identity around performed rituals besides the central theme of "respect" in her work *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Additionally, linguistic anthropologist, Kira Hall has expounded upon the uniqueness of hijra lexicon. Farsi, a dialect used by hijras as a blend of Persian, Hindi and Urdu in her research suggests that hijras validate their historical authenticity, subvert norms, and communicate furtively with each other to survive everyday hostilities. Hijras in these scholars' works remain an object of study rather than the composers of their own story. Testimonies are also edited and interceded by the researcher. While Hall's studies are outside the scope of this article, Jaffrey's book belongs loosely to a genre of compassionate albeit anecdotal travelogue. Moreover, Reddy compliments Nanda's thesis more or less as her own thematic concerns are projected onto the people she interviews. In typical anthropological *modus operandi*, she remains a detached observer despite her purported intimacy with the community. Nanda's guidelines for discussing hijra identity continue to be significant. The four known and accessible autobiographies may be read to evaluate the relevance and shortcomings of this anthropological interpretative model.

Nanda's main thesis as the title of her book suggests is that hijras can only be defined as the third sex since they are "neither man nor woman". She labours over this logical fallacy repeatedly in her work. The concept is partly conceived by considering explanations offered to her by the participant subjects as well as her own orientalist perspective of hijras' distance from the elusive Western transsexual ethos—that depend on a teleological progress towards a specific feminine ideal—as well as hijras' curious function outside the gender binary. She begins by discussing the split between Indian cultural definitions and social expectations, and actual hijra practices—

A second disjunction has to do with the cultural definition of hijras as neither men nor women and the experienced gender identity of many hijras as women. Thus, whereas many hijras did indeed tell me that they were neither men nor women, other hijras answered my questions by saying, "We hijras are like women", and proceeded to enumerate the ways in which they felt and behaved like women...The concept of a psychologically compelling desire that motivates a man to live as a woman is not well understood in India generally and certainly not among the lower-middle and lower classes from which hijras are generally recruited. This may be part of the reason that hijras say that they are "born that way"...Given that small number of people born with a physical condition that would be called hermaphroditic, it would probably be well to assume that most hijras are "made" rather than "born that way" (xix-xx).

In her deliberate rejection of a radical hijra conception of gender, Nanda comes close to establishing a monolithic figure of her own (Stone). The reason for her rejection to see hijras along a transfeminine spectrum or being heterodoxically positioned is plain prejudice against the apparent lack of trans awareness in India. She also dismisses the intersex conviction of a subject who may insist on being "born that way". If it amounts to malicious deception as criticized by trans-exclusionary feminist Bernice Hausman in the case of classical transsexual autobiographies then it is also a potentially rich site for reading subversions against biological predestination (72-109). Some hijra autobiographies do rely on the intersex conviction as yet another fact of being along with the multiplicity of becoming both the third sex as well as a woman. Such effortless contradictory ideas in hijra autobiographies also belie any easy construction. However, for Nanda, the "disjuncture" becomes the defining point as she repeatedly pursues the idea of hijras as primarily the third sex AKA neither man nor woman. Moreover, her insistence on the Eastern split from the West becomes clear when she says,

Although we in the West associate the surgical removal of the male genitals with a completely feminine gender identity, this should not be assumed for India. Of the 10 hijras I met who had the emasculation operation, all but one had done so only after many years (5 to 15) in the hijra community, and the decision to have the operation was not uniformly associated with a desire to become, or the feeling that one was already, a woman. As I have noted, the operation is connected with the cultural definition of the hijra as neither man

nor woman; for some individuals, the operation transforms them into hijras, not into women (118).

The “cultural definition” that Nanda magnifies presents only a part of the many ways the hijra community may employ to define itself. In the autobiographies, varied ideas can be found to negate a simplistic view. Living Smile Vidya writes a story about being born in a Dalit family where education is highly valued for those assigned male at birth. She grows up to get an M.A. degree in Linguistics and intendsto pursuePh.D. Her gender dissonance and growing alienation with her surroundings prevents her from continuing her life in the garb of a biological male. She decides to run away and join a hijra household. Her initiation includes beggingfor money and travel to many cities. She is finally able to save enough money to undergo castration at a hospital illegally. She goes on to leave the hijra community without severing ties andfinds a job to live on her own. Vidya’s project is dedicated to locating her reality as a woman, which is obtainable only by joining the hijras. She reverts the gaze of the other upon her sex and person to illustrate this point. She writes—

I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy.

Inwardly, I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from the outside world. I took particular trouble to remain inconspicuous at college, my unpleasant memories of my bitter experience at school still fresh in my mind, I tried to lead a false life of strenuous attempts to swagger like a man and speak like one (40).

And elsewhere she says, “I had no problem with people recognizing my femininity but hated it when they made fun of me on that account (56).” Thus, the gaze is double-bound. It recognizes but also brings ridicule and potential violence in its wake; including the violence of amis-gendering perception. Vidya reveals the main caveat with Nanda’s anthropological model not because Nanda lacks a generoushumanist perspective but because she emphasizes certain criteria for being hijra and justifies that critical choice as a cultural fact or consequence. The idea of the third sex may or may not be relevant to Vidya. Transgender may be a spectrum but hijra is a rhizomatic matrix. In Vidya’s short narrative, the stress is on womanhood. In others’ it may point elsewhere and proliferate in many directions.

A young Revathi faces many conundrums with respect to her sex and gender. She woefully says, “A woman trapped in a man’s body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered a man (15).” In seeking answers to these questions and others, Revathi would set herself on the path to becoming hijra. She is born in a poor household in rural Tamil Nadu and is often harassed for being an effeminate boy. Revathi meets a few people from the hijra community and decides to join them. She travels from Delhi to Mumbai to Bengaluru and works as a prostitute in those cities. She faces abuse at every turn, especially, from men and the police, but also from her family atthe native village she keeps returning to. Towards the end, she

finds some peaceful denouement in working for an NGO and making silent amends with her kin. Laxminarayan Tripathi takes a completely different route. Her life story about becoming a hijra is also a story of finding fame as a minor celebrity and international activist who represents Indian trans communities at conferences abroad. Unlike other hijras, she remains living at home and finds the two worlds colluding with herself in the midst. She also opts to endure hijra pedagogy but charts her own way. She writes,

I learnt everything about hijras from Shabina. She acquainted me with their history, their traditions, their lifestyle, and their sources of income...I began to realize that the hijras were a culturally rich sub-sect. Not everyone could become a hijra—it took guts...Ahijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, but not a man either. A hijra's male body is a trap—not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man...I now voraciously read everything I could lay my hands on about the hijras, and talked to many people. The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced. Yes, that was the answer. I was a woman and the world must see me as such.

I decided to become a hijra (39-40).

The moment of epiphany may be somewhat banal but the desired identity is heteroglossic. The notion of being neither man nor woman, or the third sex sits comfortably with the possibility of becoming and being known as a woman channelized through an initial third person address of “itself”. Interestingly, Tripathi decides not to opt for castration later in the narrative but that does not undervalue her status as an authentic hijra in the community's eyes. Mona Ahmed, on the other hand is disowned first by her biological family for learning to dance and joining the hijras, and later by the same hijra community for refusing to obey their mores. Ahmed adopts and raises an orphan who her guru takes custody of due to Ahmed's many purported failures in staying cordial with her hijra family. However, this drives her existential crises and exacerbates the quintessential hijra dilemma of being and becoming. Dayanita Singh in her introduction to the book explains—

It was only many years later, after Mona was thrown out of the eunuchs community and she became an outcast among the outcasts, that she told me that she wanted to tell her own story. She was no living in a double exile and started to question her identity in a way that was completely new to me. She wanted to tell the story of being neither here nor there, neither male nor female, and finally, neither a eunuch nor someone like me. She would always ask me, “Tell me: what am I?” I first assumed that a writer would have to tell her story, but after she dictated some e-mails to me, I realized that I probably underestimated her and that she could tell her own story, weaving together fact and fiction (16).

Elsewhere, Ahmed writes,

A eunuch has a male body, but the spirit is female. Why does it happen? No one becomes a eunuch by choice, meaning no one says, “I want to be a eunuch.” But there is no other way. Even when men do not have the castration and keep a moustache, their mannerisms still give them away. Why me, even you can tell. Yet you cannot say a eunuch is a homosexual. We are the third sex (63).

Womanhood, being eunuch, and third sex intersect again with the added dimension of negated sexuality. Ahmed echoes not the ease of Tripathi or the emphatic insistence of Vidya but her own specific crises that accompanies the burden of defining the community despite the extreme individualism it may suggest. Therefore, Nanda’s reliance on an abstract Eastern/ Indian culture to define a hijra is at best incomplete without taking seriously the testimonial evidence she nevertheless compiles. The autobiographies clearly show that third sex illustrated through negation of sexual dimorphism is meaningless. Interestingly, much of Indian trans political gains have depended heavily on the rhetoric of the third sex and civil rights victories such as the right to define oneself in the category of that third sex have been won much to the chagrin of the gay male dominated queer community that pursues the right to sexuality. This is not to say that Section 377 does not affect trans and hijra communities, perhaps, even more so since they are the more visible and vulnerable members. However, the fact remains that the rhetoric of the third sex maintains a tangible hold on the hijra individual and preempts what kind of politics trans persons in India may pursue (Ghosh and Mehra; Vishwanath). Therefore, it is crucial to unpack Nanda’s model as a key to deconstruct these ordained positions and margins.

Two other methods Nanda employs to restrict hijra identity in her anthropological model is through underscoring rituals’ function and artificial kinship structures. She discusses how hijra identity finds validity through myths and legends. Appositely, the rich hijra lore is sometimes acknowledged but not given the same importance in autobiographies. Nanda builds it as a classic East versus West phenomena again and adds—

In Hindu mythology, ritual, and art—important vehicles for transmitting the Hindu worldview—the power of the combined man/woman as a frequent and significant theme. Indian mythology contains numerous examples of androgynes, impersonators of the opposite sex, and individuals who undergo sex changes, both among deities and humans. These mythical figures are well known as part of Indian popular culture, which explain the ability of hijras to maintain a meaningful place for themselves within Indian society in an institutionalized third gender role (20).

Nanda is especially known for her detailed observation of the castration ritual or *nirvan*, which is organized around the worship of goddess, Bahuchara Mata (24-26). The problem remains one of a reductive approach to hijra practices. Not all hijras achieve castration ritually. While Ahmed does not reveal the details of her

surgery/ies, and Tripathi does not undergo the nirvana procedure; Vidya and Revathi take the non-ritual based medical route albeit illegally. Like Tripathi, this does not affect their position in the community and the act itself is not presented as a direct appeal to spirituality or goddess worship. Following the critical moment of surgical transformation achieved through castration, Vidya chooses to address her estranged family and her dead mother to validate her newly reclaimed womanhood instead. In an evocative opening passage to the book, she writes,

Amma, Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan anymore. I am Vidya. A complete Vidya. A whole woman. Where are you Amma? Can't you come to me by some miracle, at least for a moment? Please hold my hand, Amma. My heart seems to be breaking into smithereens. Radha, please Radha, I am no longer your brother, Radha. I am your sister now, your sister. Come to me, Radha. Chithi, Manju, Prabha, Appa...

Look at me Appa, look at my dissected body. This is a mere body. Can you see that I can bear all this pain? I can take any amount of pain, Appa. Look at me Appa. Look at me as a woman. Accept me as a girl, Appa (17).

For Ahmed who was born and raised Muslim, the moment of ritual only comes at the naming ceremony of her adopted daughter. This is also linked to her becoming a mother ergo a “complete woman”. She writes, “I distributed sweets in the whole neighbourhood and recited the azaan (Muslim prayer) in her ears and had her head shaved, as is the custom here. At night, we had a music party. I danced with joy, knowing that I was now a complete woman (83).” Taking on the traditional male role of the muezzin as a self proclaimed “eunuch” becoming a “complete woman” by the act speaks volumes against monolithic thirdness of the Nanda model. Such evidence of multiplicity and diverse practices exceed a limited conception of the hijra subject when seen solely through institutionalized functions. Ones where patriarchy tolerates hijra presence and hijras validate their own existence in retelling ordinary myths, and offer blessings to render themselves unthreatening through repeated acts of contained visibility or performance of a utility. For instance, if Indian patriarchal society may barely tolerate hijra presence then the subject is pushed to validate her community by certain coded cultural practices. Recounting myths of the community’s origin and limiting one’s visibility to blessing rituals render the hijra subject as a utile and unthreatening other. This simplistic back and forth between the oppressor and the oppressed does not explain how the envelope of hegemony opens up in various alternative ways. Ritual obsession for Revathi is as much of a moot point as it is for Vidya. However, it finds comforting resonance when Revathi is under local anesthesia. She says, “The nurse covered my eyes with a strip of cloth and asked me to say ‘Mata Mata’, and I did. I kept repeating the goddess’s name. The doctor continued to talk to me, even as he did the operation (73).” This inversion of chanting during castration is a significant yet unromanticized event in that it is not subversive of tradition but an effortless redirecting of sorts. Revathi is again reminded of her heritage when offered black tea by a nurse in post operative care because it is something only experienced hijras were supposed to know and do. It is evident that

native knowledge and urban medical expertise traverse and the boundaries are porous yet the subject does not need to justify either approach. Hijra identity may be constituted along the axis of negotiated pathways that are far more complex than ritualistic purity demanded of an imagined timeless Orient. Also, someone like Tripathi who refuses to partake in nirvan altogether, travels the world and participates in high level advocacy work is everything Nanda's ritual focused hijras are not. Tripathi's urban and upper caste privilege may be unique amongst hijras but her resistance is not. All autobiographers also feel alienated by the very community that sustains them at some point in their stories. Tripathi is perhaps the most famous and illustrative example while Ahmed is a complete outcast. In the light of this evidence, not only does Nanda's focus on rituals and kinship seem circumspect but perhaps, more as gratuitously magnified aspects of what may be quoted as hijra life.

The particular overestimation of kinship structures indeed overrides the highly individualistic ideas of the autobiographers. Hijra groups for the authors are dynamic and impermanent. Hierarchies are negotiable and gurus expendable. Nanda also cites several examples that belie her theory of hijra obedience yet she draws the conclusion that overall—

[The] dependence of hijras on their community is entirely consistent with the values and organizational principles of Indian society: a willingness of individuals to submit to hierarchy, a combining of resources and expenditures (as in a joint family) as a means of economic adaptation, and a conviction that there is no security without a group. This holds for men as well as women in India, so that most hijras, regardless of the extent of their feminine orientation, find these values and organizational principles congenial and appropriate in cultural terms (48).

Nanda's willful ignorance of hijra group dynamics comes at the cost of setting up a stereotype of communal conservatism. Is then the hijra community a microcosm representative of an idealized middle class Indian joint family? Nanda's archetypical subject is surely a product of the community by the community. Interestingly, there is no room for previous biological ties in Nanda's case studies and the autobiographers bust the myth of hijras' overdependence on their own community in varied ways. In Ahmed's case, she is twice the pariah she claims to be. She looks back on her life and wonders if castration was the right choice as the finality of the act also meant severing ties with her hostile biological family,

I always feel guilty in my heart that if I had not been castrated, I would be ok, and since I was castrated, then I should have been a good eunuch, but even that I could not be. I do not like to be under anyone's control. This is the way I am, what can I do (103)?

On the other hand, having been disowned by her hijra family and seeing her daughter taken away, she wonders if her value as a productive member of the clan was what the

kinship was really all about. Ahmed realizes that other hijras who supported her simply wanted her for the earnings,

If I was able to be like other eunuchs and obeyed them like a slave, then I would not be in this state. But I wanted to live an independent life, which was unacceptable to my guru. For 40 years, they were good to me, because I was able to sing and dance. But by the age of 52, my body began to become weak and I got lazy in my work. Then my guru started to fight me on every point and tortured me physically, but even more than that mentally. My guru always needed support. That is why he stole even Goonga, my dumb servant and took my chelas (disciples) away as well, and when Ayesha became 7 years old, he took her away as well (130).

Losing her daughter as the single most painful incident in her story leaves Ahmed incapable of building a new life. She moves to her ancestors' graveyard and builds a house amidst their headstones. She tries to raise animals hoping to attract her daughter home but they also die. Nevertheless, she persists and keeps the company of neighbourhood women. Meeting Singh gives her hope in the human connection and she is somewhat assured about not being objectified and used as she has previously been by everyone starting with her biological family. Ahmed's sharp pathos underscore her deep sense of alienation and she ends her narrative with a letter to her daughter asking her one last time to come back. One is unable to employ Nanda's model to analyze Ahmed's longings and hopes. The elaborate kinship system surely functions to keep hijras relatively safe from the outside world but Ahmed represents the crack in any descriptive generalization one may subscribe to a little too faithfully in discussing a marginalized community.

Tripathi presents another conundrum in deciding, which is more important, the hijra support system with its hierarchical demands or one's own parents? Tripathi's moments of truth come easy, as she is not a tragic failure by any means. First her budding fame makes her guru angry—

Lataguru continued to sulk. She felt I had been co-opted by the world of glamour, and she was totally opposed to this. To her way of thinking, I was a publicity-hungry sort. She also disapproved of the fact that I lived with my parents. She was possessive and orthodox, and believed that a hijra had no right to stay with her family (72).

In a surprising move, the guru moves into the same building as Tripathi to claim her right over her protégé or chela. Tripathi works hard to reconcile her two households and manages to achieve some semblance of normalcy and balance.

Revathi and Vidya do not address the problem with as much rigour as Ahmed and Tripathi but they do talk about how the split causes pain. Vidya doesn't mention it directly but it is apparent that her education and ambition to live independently trumps her affinities with the close-knit community. For Revathi, it is a matter of

practicalities that tend to catch up even if one is not bound by any strict rules. She claims, “If a hijra does not like her guru, then she must move out and be on her own. But as I had seen, living alone was not easy and brought with it a host of new problems (99).” Eventually, she feels alienated and says that unlike many other hijras she does not fully occupy the culture of her community (303). Revathi reconciles her dislocation by her work, although, in a different manner than Tripathi. She does not seek to become a hijra icon but continues to work at the grassroots level with her NGO, Sangama. In Nanda’s model, individualistic hijras who pursue interests outside the group do not exist and the image of a tribe with erased individuality has indeed captured the popular imagination and crystallized over time—That all hijras must be alike, indistinguishable from one another. This oversimplification is a peculiar epistemological violence, one, which autobiographers seem to offer recovery from by presenting their highly personal accounts. The methodology behind Nanda’s model is perhaps to be blamed. She candidly reveals her own bias by saying,

In the course of telling a life story, selection always occurs in the mind of the narrator as certain events are revealed, others omitted, some exaggerated, elaborate, or minimized. These narratives were elicited by my interest in hijras and are subject to selection in response both to my particular interest and also by each narrator’s wish to present a certain picture of herself. (113).

Nanda places the blame as much on herself as she does on her subjects. Singh attests to the popular opinion that hijras are a somewhat mysterious community that manipulates their abiding image cleverly (9). The problem could lie in the gaze of a supposedly neutral researcher and not what is underneath the tantalizing cover of well documented motifs like flamboyance and spiritual performances. The obsession with the truth of hijra life and the persistent image of hijras as unfathomable creatures has unfortunately resulted in sweeping accounts that have fuelled transphobia and hijra-phobia. Meanwhile, little has changed in the life of the subaltern. A handful of autobiographers who had to transcend their circumstances and often break the rules of their own communities to shine as examples of survival should not be held accountable as either representative icons or overestimated symbols. What the meagre canon of hijra autobiography does well to illustrate is that one can attempt to read complexities of hijra life outside the “right information” prioritized and augmented by Nanda for what has come to be a metonymic function (113). The autobiographies deconstruct anthropological investigatory framework as perhaps, a point of departure and not a manual to understand a diverse community teeming with stories yet untold.

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