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Identity Search as Women among Trans Women in India: A Study on A. Revathi's *Truth About me: A Hijra Life Story*

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Abstract:

Transgender woman or trans woman, who is a male by birth, changes the gender at a certain age. They are women, but the acceptance of them in the Indian society is considerably low, when compared to other countries. The society, being patriarchal, if a man changes the gender and becomes a female, treats them in an indifferent manner. They are treated as a commodity for flesh market. The society is not bothered about the thought processes and mindsets of the transwomen; though they want themselves to be treated as women. They are ill-treated and are labelled as an isolated group. This situation has to change. It is taking shape. Third gender is nowadays considered for jobs.

The study focuses on the identity crisis faced by transwomen in general and Revathi, in particular, with the support of queer theory. Can they get the identity as woman or mother or wife? The societal taboos and its manifestations will change and it would be in near future that they are also treated as a part of women community. This research throws light on the transwoman who are educated and live with a mystified identity in the Indian society.

Keywords: Identity Search, Trans Women, Transgender, patriarchal, Indian.

The patriarchal society of India has paved little room for the liberalization of thoughts, especially on the transgender community. In fact it has to be the right of an individual to remain 'male-self' or 'female - self'. Though the nation seems to be progressive in thinking, there is a tinge of conservative ardour in the approach towards them. Transwomen, the ones who changed their gender to women, are not accepted as women in the society. The reason is the problem of identity. Can they be addressed as he or she? This fine line of confusion is exploited and they are ill treated in the society of India. A woman is complete when she is a mother; the very myth has made a barrier in the Indian society. There are many women in India who cannot be a mother of a child of their own, through natural gestation. So this statement can be clearly ruled out when it comes to a transwoman. They are the third genders, independently existing genders that are legally accepted. Why their existence is treated normal? Why are they getting a different look from the society? For the convenience of addressing, certain words are coined and it is the same

when it comes to transgenders. The famous British transgender activist Stephen Whittle has pointed out in his foreword to *The Transgender Reader*, "Cultural spaces and historiographies are constantly reframing the community, the identities, culture and language. We see new languages being developed constantly; for example 'per' as a pronoun developed by UK community members with non-existent gender identities, and similarly the US term 'hir' for those who have both." (Xi-xii).

Queer theory, the term has been used first by Teresa de Lauretis in the year 1991. She has published an article in a journal *Differences* titled 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities'. It is an umbrella term for sexuality, gay and lesbian studies, transgender studies and the like. Here in this study the focus is more on the transgender studies and the femininity in the trans women, their cultural acceptance. Since this theory has its base in post structuralism, the concept of deconstruction - the deconstructed identity of transgender - is analysed. The real self is demolished and a new self is constructed, the new identity. The reach of the new identity, the acceptance by the society and the self-acceptance are discussed in this study. This theory explains the female affinity towards phallus, the male genitals, and they get into a male body. Similarly the men also have affinity towards being a woman. So they change their identity in different ways. These transformed men or women are called transgenders, and they don't get the independent identity of a man or a woman.

The study focuses on the deconstructed identity of Transwomen in general and Revathi in particular. Here the identity of Doraisamy is demolished and a new construction of identity is made as Revathi. It is 'her story' and 'her perspectives' that is considered for this study. She is not free from the clutches of the cynical society and of course her family. In the preface of *Truth about me: A Hijra story*, Revathi writes, "As a hijra, I get pushed to the fringes of the society (...). I do not seek sympathy from society or government. I seek to show we hijras do have the rights to live in this society." (5-6).

Revathi's life began as a boy named Doraisamy, the name given to him by the family. He was the youngest in the family of the three brothers and a sister. He had a secret passion towards girly things (feminine things). While referring to the childhood, it is quite difficult to thrust on the pronoun 'he' or 'she'. Here, in this study, the identity of Doraisamy is referred to 'he'. This absence of pronoun is the real identity crisis. Here comes the real baffling statement, 'she was he'. This perplexity has made them the third gender in the society, based on their ontological existence. The aforementioned passion or desire towards feminine things, Doraisamy always felt that he has the secret self of a woman, and he was not a complete man or a woman. Revathi wrote, "A woman trapped in the body of a man was how I thought of myself. I wondered why God has chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me and why He could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. (...), and all the time I was obsessed, confused and anxious." (15).

Doraisamy, the male physique has nothing to do with the mindset of the female inside. She hated the male organ that was imposed on her by God. In her work *A Life in Trans Activism*, Revathi says, “Who am I? This was a question I often asked myself even as a child” (1). The basic question of identity has been posed by Doraisamy as a child and later it was answered through the life as a trans woman. The ‘she – factor’ in Doraisamy made him join the hijra community at Dindigul, where he got to know that he has to do ‘nirvaana’ (castration) to become a woman. The female identity made him perform the surgery and the doctor asked him, “Do you want me to arrange things so that you can pee like women do from below, or as men do from above? I want to live as a woman, which is why I wanted this operation” (ALITA 20). Here the eagerness to become a woman is clearly seen. The true identity of Doraisamy is completely transformed and he becomes she.

The acceptance in the society was a matter of serious concern. After the surgery Revathi had to use the women’s toilet at the railway station and a policewoman shooed her off from there, since she is a hijra and scolded her to be like a man and work like a man. Her desires were far beyond the societal thoughts. She is a woman; the researcher would like to call Revathi a woman. The Indian society called her hijra. If she has to be a woman, she should wear saree and pierce her nose and ears.

If born a pottai, and when living amongst pottais, it is important that the person pierces her ears and nose, grows her hair. If you merely wear press button earrings and wig, no one really respects you. Likewise, if you happen to see a man crossing your path, you’re expected to make way for him, bend your head bashfully and make sure that the chest is covered. (47).

The major problem faced by the transwomen is their physical appearance. They have a huge body in general, that is an attribute of a man. So when they dress up in sarees and ornaments, people tend to tease them and poke fun at them. Revathi’s case was not different from this. She says:

One day I was on my scooter, waiting, I heard the auto rickshaw drivers talking amongst themselves about me. One group was sure I was a man, the other group insisted I was a woman. One of the men in the first group said that I was big built and no woman is that large, and no woman would wear the kind of clothes I wore or cut the hair as I had done. (228).

By doing so Revathi has been accepted as a hijra by the society. The transgenders are economically withered. They find their living by involving in begging or flesh trade. They come in groups for *doli-baddai*. “Hijras play the dholak, sing and dance and this is called doli-baddai. They do this at weddings and during child birth. People give them what they can afford- rice, wheat, a sari.” (47). They do this basically for their survival, since they are not treated as women and are not given any jobs. Revathi has become one among them. She has her own way of

thinking. She has carnal desires as a woman and wanted to experience it. She has no other option but to join the sex workers to satisfy herself. There also she suffered, as the society demanded the unnatural ways of conjugation and she was hurt physically and mentally. This episode can be considered as a part of identity search of Revathi, her urge to become a complete woman, though she is not.

Construct of woman identity

The narrative of Revathi portrays the crippled identity of a human being, who has faced the non-cultural acceptance from the society. This limitation of cultural construction of gender has paved way to ponder the significance of psyche for the decision making. Here the choice of the transgender identity paves the way to construct an identity. The society has no role to play in the psyche of an individual and his/her decision making. The female spirit, "wrapped in a male body" has made Revathi to take up a quite challenging decision of living a woman's life. This construct of a woman identity is crucial, as the society has to accept her as a woman, which is next to impossible. But the boldness in Revathi has made her construct the woman identity with the physical transformation also.

After the traumatic phase of transformation, Revathi finds herself more interested in leading a family life, with husband and children. She knows her bodily limitations that she cannot conceive and give birth to a child. Adoption was another option in front of her (from within people of her kind). Every woman has a mother in her, whether she delivers a child or not. "I knew I couldn't have biological children (...), after all isn't it motherhood all about being nurturing and caring?" (ALITA 39-40). The real woman in Revathi has made her take a decision of bringing up a child. Fortunately she has got three daughters, who were males before and castrated themselves to females. They are Mayuri, Famila and Ritu. They are good friends, the trio, who are educated in Bengaluru and they speak English fluently. They have been living independently in different houses with their male partners. They easily "pass off as women" (ALITA 41). They call Revathi 'Mummy' and they mean it. They are called the *chelas* (disciples) of Revathi according to hijra custom. Once again her identity as a woman is ensured here.

The next phase is her acceptance in her family at Namakkal village. After her transformation to Revathi, she has decided to visit her family in the attire of a female, to reassure her identity as a woman. Her brother was about to thrash her, but she could stop him by saying: "Look! I've had an operation and I'm a woman now. You can't beat me as before, you have no right to do." (113). She has informed them about the surgery that has transformed her to be a woman. The very information has made her mother and brothers got agitated. Still the ardent desire of becoming a woman has come true, though she is a 'pottai', a transgender, in front of the relatives; she can pass off as a woman in the places where she is new to. Her sister accepted her as a woman. She made her child call her, aunty. Here the identity is constructed as a woman; a reassured identity.

The society has not accepted the trans woman as woman in general, Revathi, in particular. They are worried because of their physical appearance and they are measured with a cultural tool which is totally unfamiliar. Revathi, the empowered *woman*, has made a challenging decision to write her autobiography and make the world understand the problems faced by her and the women of her sort. She has a statement to the society; hijras are no longer “stared at” and “laughed” (83), but rather consider them as human beings.

Men and women stared at us and laughed, and heckled us. Why a crippled person a blind person – even attract pity and people help them. If someone has experienced a physical hurt, they are cared for both by family and by outsiders who come to know of it. But we – we are not considered humans. (83).

In *Truth About My Life* Revathi accepts the fact that she belongs to hijra community, and she is not a woman, but she wants to be a woman. Thus she transformed herself to Revathi from the body of Doraisamy, in fact she freed her female soul, which was trapped in a male body. To the society, this is heights of insanity, and these transformed women are called escapists according to them. To get rid of the jobs done by men, they get into the attire of women and involve in begging. They don't understand the deepest desire of them to be a woman. They know only the gender binaries - male and female. Their cultural taboos don't allow the new women (transformed women) to be treated as women or educate them.

The Indian society, though patriarchal basically, is considered to be a progressive society, but trans women, are they given justice in the society? Are they getting benefits as every other women get? The answer is a NO. This situation has to change. They have to be treated as women, also have to be given proper education and job. That is progressive thinking. They should be treated as human beings. Revathi voices for them to have justice from the society, to be treated as human beings. Her identity as woman should be an inspiration to others. Sometimes a story that makes you ashamed of can be a turning point in the life of many. Let this be an eye opener for the society.

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