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Reading the Queer: A Study of Third Gender Identity in Laxmi's Autobiography *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*

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Abstract:

Following the historical judgement passed by the Supreme Court of India in 2014 declaring transgenders as the 'third gender', several studies have been conducted to locate the identity of the queer people in the family, community and the larger society to understand the effect of the Supreme Court's decision on the actual experiences of this marginalized group. In the struggles of the hijra community to establish their own identity as well as day-to-day conflicts, renowned hijra activist Laxminarayan Tripathi's contributions have been immense. Not only has she been instrumental in bringing about a marked change in the queer identity in India but also has set a benchmark by showcasing herself as an empowered hijra, representing the causes of her community globally. This paper looks at Laxmi's autobiography *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* (2015) as an important literary intervention in the debate between the real effects of the Supreme Court judgement on the lives of the queer people vis-à-vis their daily struggles for identity. The paper will be based on the theoretical framework of Butler's 'gender performativity', Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's ideas on 'same-sex love in India' and Nivedita Menon's path-breaking viewpoints on the queer identity.

Keywords: gender, identity, hijra, third gender, queer, Laxmi, transgenders, body, sex, desire.

“If they see breasts and long hair coming,
they call it woman.
If beard and whiskers they call it man.
But look, the self that hovers in between
Is neither man nor woman...” (Ramanujan 67)

A phenomenal change in the outlook of the Indian society towards the third gender took place following the April 2014 Supreme Court judgement declaring transgenders as the 'third gender', thereby, affirming that the fundamental rights granted under the Constitution of India are applicable for this category of people too. This landmark decision is regarded as a crucial step towards gender equality in India. The primary petitioner in this case was the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) which was backed by other petitioners – the Poojya Mata Nasib Kaur Ji Women Welfare Society, an NGO, and Laxminarayan Tripathy, a renowned Hijra activist. Following this historical judgement, several studies have been conducted to specify the different dimensions related to the identity of transgenders in India. This paper is an attempt to look at Laxminarayan Tripathy's autobiography, *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* (2015), as an important literary intervention in the debate between the judgement passed by the Supreme Court in 2014 and the actual crisis of identity in the journey of a transgender's life. This paper will also look at Laxmi's empowerment as a hijra activist in the formation of her identity.

Laxminarayan Tripathy (referred by her first name in the autobiography) born in a high caste Brahmin household, was a male but was effeminate in mannerisms. Right from her childhood days, she felt that she was a woman trapped in a man's body. This entrapment is caused mainly due to the society's regulations on gender-specific roles or performance. First coined by Judith Butler in her book titled *Gender Trouble* (1990), the theory of 'Gender Performance' or 'Gender Performativity' mainly centres on gender identities which originated primarily in the context of the feminist movement and discourse, but encompassed significantly the ideas of 'Queer Theory'. Butler's primary concern was that gender identity does not go hand in hand with biological determination of sex, thereby, emphasizing the widely quoted statement made by Simone de Beauvoir that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (Beauvoir 295) Moving further in this context, Butler argues that – "there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a pre discursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along." (Butler 1998) In the case of Laxmi, it took several years for her to realize her real self. An educated individual, a bharatnatyam dancer, a model coordinator, an actor and an activist, Laxmi sets benchmarks in every work she did. Recollecting her childhood days, she states:

"The sweet memories of childhood enrapture everyone. But not me. I'm different because I did not have a happy childhood. Parents love children and give them what they want. I, too, was given everything by my parents, and to this day there is nothing that I lack. But what I've never had is the innocence that makes a child what it is. I don't know what innocence is. If I tax my memory and try to remember the things of the past, all I can think of is illness, and..." (Rao & Joshi 1)

Laxmi's memories of her childhood days are clearly at a conflict brought in by the societal expectation on gender-specific roles. Commenting on such roles, Nivedita Menon says,

“The question of gender-appropriate behaviour is thus inextricably linked to legitimate procreative sexuality. That is, sexuality strictly policed to ensure the purity and continuation of crucial identities, such as, caste, race and religion. Non-heterosexual desire threatens the continuation of these identities since it is not biologically directly procreative; and if non-heterosexual people have children by other means, such as technological interventions or adoption, then the purity of these identities is under threat.” (Menon 4)

Thus, Laxmi’s childhood, under the pressure of conformation to such ‘gender-appropriate’ behaviour, was not a usual one. Being sexually assaulted at the age of seven, Laxmi stood up for herself when she realized that she is being forced and blackmailed. She states: “...I decided to be rowdy and aggressive as they were. I dared them to touch me. It worked.” (Rao & Joshi 8) She protested against sexual advances at the age of fourteen and since then there was no turning back for her. Soon she realized that her sexual orientation is different and this always baffled and confused her. Much later in her life, she realized the fact that she was a hijra. She faced all the trials and tribulation that a hijra goes through - be it begging or sex work. Her femininity always craved for a true companion, the love that would accept her as a human, as a hijra. Commenting on such desire for acceptance in human beings, whether heterosexual or homosexual, Ruth Vanita says,

“Many societies have viewed romantic attachments between men and women as perfectly compatible with marriage and procreation, that is, a person may be responsible spouse and parent, but his or her primary emotional attachment may be to a friend of his or her own gender. It is only relatively recently in human history that the heterosexual monogamous relationship has come to be viewed as necessarily a married person’s chief emotional outlet....Love need not take an explicitly sexual form, but it is nearly always expressed in language of poetic excess and metaphoric power.” (Vanita & Kidwai xxiv)

Laxmi’s craving for a true companion is also not limited only to the desires of the body but to the longing of the soul. She never shied away from her femininity but accepted it and fought for it. Laxmi is the first transgender to represent Asia Pacific in UN in 2008 and who has been working for the rights of the third gender or the transgender for over two decades. Laxmi has been representing issues like gender change and the transgender problems, HIV AIDS related issues in transgender in several conferences of national and international stature. She pioneered the Indian Third Gender Movement and was the leading head to take up the case to the Supreme Court of India for establishing a gender other than that of Male and Female i.e., the third gender- ‘others’. At present she is one of the leading voices of the hijra community and one who is breaking the stereotypes within the community itself to empower this marginalized sect within the society to give them equal rights as human. Her interest in activism led her to the establishment of the organization ‘Astitava’ in 2007 which works for the welfare of the sexual minorities.

Laxmi's autobiographical work *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* stands out to be one of the most celebrated works in this genre. The work is based on her life as hijra which is clearly indicated by the emphasis on "Me". According to Jasbir Puar, "one must interrogate not only how the nation disallows certain queers but perhaps more urgently, how the nations produce and may in fact sanction certain queer subjectivities over other". (Puar 414) The book re-defines the meaning of 'hijra' and changes our perspective in viewing them. Laxmi states: "The word 'hij' refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides called 'hijra'." (Rao & Joshi 39) Further she states: "A Hijra 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." (Rao & Joshi 40). A hijra is always born as a male and is distinctly different from a hermaphrodite who has both male and female sexual organs. A hijra has male genitals but feels womanly from within. The conflict between the desires of the body and the societal expectations of 'performativity' is a common experience for the queer people. This also results from various myths related to the body, primarily culminating in the idea "...that bodies are naturally entirely one sex or another; that hermaphroditism (bodies possessing both male and female sexual characteristics) is a disease; and that desire naturally flows only between 'opposite' sexes." (Menon 53) Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik has rightly stated that queerness is not only modern or western or sexual and has been represented quite a lot even in the Hindu mythology. Even the hijra community signifies their ancient existence by pointing out tales from epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Not only Hindu mythologies but there are several other mythologies in the world that have tales of queer relations. One tale that the Hijra community firmly believes is from *Ramayana*, when Lord Rama was leaving for his fourteen years of exile, his kinsmen accompanied him till the outskirts of the kingdom. Seeing the love of his citizens for him Lord Rama requested 'all men and women to return to the kingdom and wait for him.' But the transgenders remained there and when Lord Rama returned, he was astonished to find them there. On enquiring he learns that he advised only the men and women and they are neither men nor women. Pleased by their love and dedication towards him, Lord Rama bestows them with a boon that whatever they give, either a curse or a blessing it will come true. However, Indian mythological texts on same-sex love or sex conversion are not always from a positive perspective. Ruth Vanita in this connection states:

"For a man to become a woman and remain a woman seems to be a disaster in many texts. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Narada tells King Pracinabarhis a cautionary tale – that of Puranjana, whose excessive love for women led to his rebirth as a woman. The moral of this story, according to Narada, is: 'Renounce the householder's stage of life [lit. women's house] with its talk about extremely lustful and lascivious gatherings' (IV. 29.55). However, a new pattern emerges in the later Puranas, influenced by ascendant Vaishnava devotion, wherein men aspire to become women (as opposed to this happening to them involuntarily). This pattern becomes dominant in the medieval period, when erotic love displaces friendship as

the main form of devotion, and men wish to be reborn as women and to live as women, in relation to God.” (Vanita & Kidwai 22)

Thus we can see a dual perspective presented in our mythological texts with regard to same-sex love or sex conversion.

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi tells the tale of Laxmi’s journey from being a male to the third gender. The different gendered role that she delves into is described in great detail by her. She recognizes herself as a hijra as she proudly states: “I was now neither a man nor a woman. I was a hijra. I had my own identity. No longer did I feel like an alien.” (Rao & Joshi 43) Her individuality and her confidence in selfprove a stepping stone to what she is today. She is a celebrity figure among her community which is quite difficult to achieve as the society would constantly put these hijras down but Laxmi voices out her individuality and stands up for her fellow hijras in order to provide them a better life. It is quite difficult to understand the authenticity of their lives but according to Laxmi’s testimony, in her confessional book, she gives a clear picture of the kind of life a hijra has. The agony, despair, pain and suffering that they endure are inexpressible. Laxmi is an exception in this case because she does not face rejection from her family and friends, but she witnesses several other hijras who face rejections and abuse at the hands of their families and friends.

However, over the years hijras have been always looked down as a menace in society. They are usually outcasted by their families and also society. But Laxmi’s autobiography defies and breaks many such myths and stereotypes governing the perception of the layman. Laxmi’s acceptance by her family breaks the prevailing norm and sets an example for those families where such children are born. Commenting on society’s slow but steady positive change in attitude towards the queer people, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai say, “One positive effect of the debate (on queerness) is that lies about homosexuality – for example, that it was unknown in ancient India and that it is a foreign import – are now being combated by many, who point to ancient texts and temple sculptures as also to folk songs and everyday life to demonstrate the opposite.” (Vanita & Kidwai 248) In Laxmi’s autobiography, such positive change in the attitude of the family is reflected when she reminiscences on a television show “Sach ka Samna” in which she had participated and was accompanied by her family and the family acceptance on her queerness was pretty clearly evident. Supporting Laxmi’s choice, her father states: “Why should I expel Laxmi from the family? I am his father, he is my responsibility. A Hijra can be born to any family. If we spurn them and show them the door, we leave them with no alternative but to become beggars. Driving Laxmi out of the house was out of question.” (Rao & Joshi 123) Speaking about her family, Laxmi states, “My parents were never ashamed of me. They did not ask me to leave the house when I became a hijra...How many hijras in India could boast of such supportive parents? It was quite the opposite with most hijras – their families emerged as the biggest villains of the piece. I was indeed lucky.” (Rao & Joshi 123,124) There are several other

instances in the book where Laxmi gives examples of other hijras who are not accepted by their families, while some are accepted only after a lot of denial. Commenting on the lot of queer people in India, Nivedita Menon states, "In India, queer people are in touch with a few people who acknowledge their intersex condition but publicly live as either male or female. There has generally been no conversation that they have had with their parents or their doctors about their condition. Thus, they live in the sort of loneliness experienced by many others who have to hide important parts of their identities." (Menon 80-81) The position a hijra holds in a society is nothing less than a black spot, the constant humiliation that they face from the society, the lack of proper opportunities and the basic rights have reduced their condition to that of a beggar. The only thing they resort to for their living is begging, sex work, bar dancing and 'badhai'. They are not offered any proper education or employment opportunities. Also not all hijras can perform 'badhai', but only those who have undergone the *nirvana* or the sex reassignment surgery can perform it and the ones who do 'badhai' would not indulge in *dhandra* or sex-work. According to Gayatri Reddy, in the Hyderabad hijra community a "real" hijra is like an "ascetic or sannyasi completely free of sexual desire" and the *nirvana* operation is essential to attain that status. (Reddy 56) The *nirvana* surgery seems quite important as it gives the castrated hijra a higher status within their hijra community, they can perform 'badhai'. But Laxmi states that it is a belief that only a minority section of hijra community has and even she chose not to be castrated. Voicing her thoughts on the same, she says,

"It is believed that hijras are castrated. We call it 'nirvana'. In the eyes of the public, we are castrated males. But that is not always the case. Castration is strictly optional, and every hijra decides for herself whether or not to undergo it. Castration cannot be forced upon a hijra though the world believes that a castrated hijra alone is a real hijra, we do not endorse this. I am not castrated. I did not opt for it and my guru did not pressure me into it. Most of my *chelas* are not also uncastrated like me. But yes, many of us have had breast implants." (Rao & Joshi 156)

Laxmi breaks several myths and breaks the taboos prevalent within the society about the hijras. One such is that hijras are believed to kidnap young males and castrate them to turn them into hijra, in order to increase their population. She protests this vehemently stating that "...hijras receive orders from their community to convert people to their gender is a myth." (Rao & Joshi 157)

Looking beyond the roles of the family in the lives of hijras, the hijra community plays a significant role in their survival and development. The hijra community is a big family with their own rules and regulations, rituals and traditions; set by the heads of the community and which differs according to the family the hijra belongs to. There are seven *Parivaar* (family) with each family having a head or *nayak* and under them there are several *gurus* (mother) who have *chelas* (daughters) and again the daughters have daughters and the *guru* will be the *nani* to them. The hijras have to be *chela* of some *guru* in order to be in the hijra community. Also if they are

engaged in any work that does not prescribe to their ways or traditions, they are excommunicated by their *gurus*. Within this big family there are lots of issues, such as, jealousy, insecurity, elopement, fights, like every other family. Laxmi's first *guru* Lataguru's bond with her was initially quite good but soon she tried to dominate her because of jealousy and the attention that Laxmi was getting from the society. According to the rules of the hijra community, one must break all ties from their family or at least stay away from their biological family, with their *guru* or *chelas*. Laxmi did not accept this and continued to stay with her family which caused Lataguru to be miffed with her. Even Laxmi's activism and her growing celebrity status alarmed her *guru* and she tried to create obstacles in her path. In contrast to Laxmi's relationship with Lataguru is Laxmi's relationship with her own *chelas*. Both the relationships are quite contrasting as Laxmi empowers her *chelas* as well as all others hijras. For instance, it is quite clear that Laxmi's concern for her *chelas* is endearing and her loving nature made her loved by all her *chelas*. When any of her *chelas* are in trouble, she is always by their side and this was evident when Subhadra's sudden disappearance and her death breaks the fellow hijras, Laxmi supports helps them to overcome their grief. She sets an example for 'Guru-Chela' relationship which should always be empowering rather than a dominating one. She prepared her *chelas* on how to deal with police and other problems that they might encounter on their day-to-day life in contrast to the behavior that she encountered from Lataguru. Laxmi breaks certain myths that society holds against hijras. Hardly any research has been done on the transgender community to understand their subcultures and the ethnicity. With few autobiographies like *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi; A Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi; *I am Vidya* by Vidya and a handful of films about them which aptly describe their lives and their cultures, much about the hijras' lives are still shrouded in mystery. Laxmi writes in her autobiography: "People are curious to know about hijras. How do we live? Behave? What do we do? Do we kidnap children? What funeral rites are performed for a hijra after her death? Is she cremated or buried? Such questions do not have answers....because we hijras are so secretive about our lives, hearsay rules the roost". (Rao & Joshi 155)

On a global level, transgenders are socially accepted; they are considered normal human beings with their basic rights to education and employment unlike India. Here the condition is even worse than that of Dalits or various tribal groups. The life of discrimination and deprivation that the hijras live in India is unimaginable. Laxmi as a hijra is very different from the general hijra community. Being educated she rejects the norms within the hijra community; also it may be because she belonged to a higher class Brahmin family due to which she never had to face discrimination and humiliation based on her caste. While representing the transgender community on the global level, Laxmi sets a mark of revolution that there is a "Third Gender" within the society and the society must accept them as human beings. As Pradeep Patkar writes in the 'Foreword to the Marathi Edition' of Laxmi's autobiography:

"In human society, one's sexual organs are supposed to determine one's gender and sexual orientation. We call a human being with a penis and testicles male, and expect him to be

attracted to women. We call a human being with vagina and breasts female, and expect her to be attracted to men. Nature, however, does not always see it in such straightforward terms. Hence, people like Laxmi exist in the world.” (Rao & Joshi 223)

Laxmi's constant battle with society and creating awareness among the hijras about HIV/AIDS and promoting safe sex work and also working for their welfare contributed to the attainment of the category of “third gender” for the transgenders. It is quite evident from her involvement in organizations like DWS and also her own organization “Astitava”. When she realizes that the DWS was not expanding its horizons, she along with her fellow activists establish “Astitava” and started to work on creating awareness among hijras about HIV/AIDS and went to hospitals to make sure that hijras get proper medical aid. She devised different ways to build up the morale of the hijras. She organized beauty pageants for the hijras. All she wanted was to reverse the mindset of the masses who over ages have considered hijras to be ugly. The whole idea of the beauty pageant not only built up the morale of the hijra but also gave them the feeling of self-love. Speaking about this essential self-confidence, Pradeep Patkar says in the ‘Foreword to the Marathi Edition’: “Hijras are considered ugly. But when I see Laxmi - tall, sturdy, beautiful and confident - my stereotypes are automatically destroyed. To hijras, Laxmi is the light at the end of the tunnel.” (Rao & Joshi 225)

The Government of India until the Supreme Court of India passed the historic judgement of confirming the right of the country's LGBT citizens to freely express their sexuality without discrimination was not so kind to this community. According to Supreme Court's judgement: “Sexual orientation is an essential attribute to privacy.” (Benjamin Kentish) Further, the judgement stated: “Discrimination against an individual on the basis of sexual orientation is deeply offensive to the dignity and self-worth of the individual. Equality demands that the sexual orientation of each individual in society must be protected on an even platform.” (Benjamin Kentish) Deeply moving with various instances on discrimination, Laxmi's book reveals the pain and humiliation that the hijras have to go through. On one instance, Laxmi felt the humiliation herself when she was asked to leave the Bombay Gymkhana because of her sexuality. She understood the dimension of the discrimination that hijras faced in their day-to-day life. Although she was quite famous, yet the humiliation urged her to fight against the government for their rights so that no individual would humiliate them on the basis of their sexuality. Even her struggle for getting passport indicates the negligence and ignorance that the society and the government have for these people. Her pioneering the ‘Third Gender Movement’ caused a lot of controversies but ultimately the Government of India permitted them their rights as the third gender. Now hijras can apply for passports by stating their sex as ‘others’ (O). Same holds good for Aadhar card and ration cards. This small step by the Government changed a lot of lives towards the betterment.

Being a hijra is a matter of choice, which Laxmi emphasizes through her autobiography. It is important to realize that sex and gender are different aspects. The sexual binaries of the hijras are quite different from other categories like homosexuals or transgenders. Laxmi's autobiography lays bare the trajectory of the roller-coaster life of a hijra. It also draws attention to the fact that despite the Supreme Court judgement providing an identity to the 'Third Gender', things have not been smooth for these people. It is only a handful of hijras like Laxmi who have been able to turn the table to their side and push themselves towards empowerment. The fate for the majority of her community still borders on daily struggles for establishment of identity and survival. The day-to-day struggles of a hijra can be summed up in the words of Nivedita Menon:

“The identity of the hijras is not in question here. Nor is the fact that hijras today are among the most marginalized of communities in India, often reduced to the borders of criminal extortion (in the guise of demanding traditional gifts at weddings and childbirths) in order to make a living. They are routinely harassed by police and physically threatened and/or assaulted under the umbrella of Section 377. Their specific needs for a dignified existence are not addressed by any political grouping, and certainly not by the women's movement.” (Menon 105)

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