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The Quest for Social Acceptance in A. Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*

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Abstract:

The Indian society is tightly bound with various norms and notions which are rigid on the basis of its class, caste and gender. The society fails to understand that gender and sex are two distinct concepts and often assimilate these concepts as one. Any other sexual orientation of individuals is regarded as 'abnormal' because as Nivedita Menon states, "Section 377 penalizes sexual activity 'against the order of nature'. The assumption is that 'normal' sexual behaviour springs from nature, and that it has nothing to do with culture or history or human choices." (Menon 93) Further she questions, "But what if we consider the uncomfortable idea that rules regulating sexuality are produced by different human societies in their different contexts, and don't just spring from nature?" (Menon 93) Based on Menon's arguments, this paper attempts to throw light on the prejudices and preconceived notions that the society has about the non-heterosexuals, particularly the transgenders. The transgenders or hijras are in a constant battle against the world for their social acceptance and also for their identity crisis. This paper deals with Revathi's autobiography *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* from the similar perspective where Revathi struggles to establish her real identity in the society.

Keywords: identity, hijra, third gender, queer, Revathi, transgenders, gender, sex, society.

Look here, dear fellow;
I wear these men's clothes
Only for you.

Sometimes I am man,

Sometimes I am woman. (Ramanujan 87)

In a patriarchal setup, the gender roles assigned to men and women are completely based on their biological makeup. This heteronormative patriarchal setup fails to understand the different sexual orientation in individuals. Studies on queer identity question and criticize the heteronormative structure of the society. The society completely ignores those people who have different sexual orientation, particularly the transgenders or hijras. Mousam Mondal points out in his paper on "Gender Geometry: A Study of A. Revathi's Autobiography *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*" - "Thus one of the grass root level struggle of the transgender community is the struggle for a dignified social recognition of the transgender community as an independent existing gender category." (Mondal 126) The hijras have always craved for social acceptance which the heteronormative society has denied. Their struggle for basic rights is usually a stirring saga that several hijra and LGBT writers and activists have thrown light upon. In the 'Preface' of her autobiography, Revathi points out her reason for writing this book; she states, "As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of the society. Yet I have dared to share my innermost life with you - about being a hijra and also about doing sex work. My story is not meant to offend, accuse or hurt anyone's sentiments. My aim is to introduce to my readers the lives of hijras, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires." (Geetha v-vi) Based on this urge for continuous seeking of identity of the hijra, this paper aims to look at the story of A. Revathi as projected in her autobiography to study the trajectory of the third gender to gain social acceptance.

A. Revathi, born as Doraiswamy, is one of those few transgenders to pen down the stirring saga of the transgenders, their roller-coaster journey of life in search of identity. Doraiswamy (Revathi) belonged to a dalit family, residing in a small village in Namakkal taluk of Salem district. Being the youngest son in the family, Doraiswamy was entitled to good education and was not forced to work unlike his brothers. Therefore, being constantly surrounded by the women in the house, Doraiswamy picked up the effeminate mannerisms quickly. Her effeminate behaviour did not affect her family initially, but soon when her mannerisms were publicly exposed, she was bullied and called by several names like 'number nine', 'girly boy' etc. This affected Doraiswamy (Revathi) for a long time because every time she was bullied or teased, she questioned her identity. This identity crisis mainly originates from what Judith Butler terms as the 'heterosexual matrix' – a grid which is produced by the various

societal institutions and practices – which links the human body to certain fixed sexual identity on the basis of the biological body. Any identity which does not map with this matrix of heterosexual identity with the specific male or female body is considered abnormal. Thus, Revathi's teenage was the most crucial time for her since that was the period when she could comprehend the essence of womanliness, a self that she was at comfort with. Explaining this state of mind, Revathi says:

“I did know that I behaved like a girl, it felt natural for me to do so. I did not know how to be like a boy. It was like eating for me – just as I would not stop eating because someone asked me not to eat, I felt like I could not stop being a girl, because others told me I ought not to be so.” (Geetha 7)

Dressing up like a woman, draping her sister's saris and dancing or imitating the heroines in front of the mirror was things that relaxed and soothed her from the taunts and bullying. But all these were done behind the closed doors and away from the eyes of the criticizing society. Her effeminacy baffled her but the self-realization helped her to accept her real identity as a transgender. Behind the closed doors, Doraiswamy turned to Revathi and finally accepted her real identity as a woman even though such conflicting identity is not acceptable by the heteronormative society.

As Doraiswamy's journey to become Revathi began, she found a couple of similar men who explained that she is a woman trapped in a man's body. Revathi states: “A few people even told me that I ought to have been born a man. I felt elated from all this praise.” (Geetha 14) Further when she senses the changes within her, she points out: “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. I longed to be with men, but felt shamed by this feeling.” (Geetha 15) Revathi begins her journey to adapt womanhood when she travels with her fellow friends to Dindigul to get acquainted with the hijra culture, which she was completely unaware of earlier. She spent days in Dindigul learning about the hijra way of living. When she returns back to her home, she realizes that her male identity is not normal for her, although it is the socially acceptable identity. Therefore, she escapes from her village and elopes to Delhi to meet her Guru. From Delhi to Hyderabad, the journey that Revathi undergoes is full of ups and downs, the brutal realities that underline the lives of a hijra .In search of a proper and stable life, Revathi struggles and stumbles upon several people and places.

Her story describes realistic incidents that touch the heart of the readers. All the troubles that she undergoes are not only physical but also emotional and that made her question the position that a transgender holds in a society. Thus, she joins a Bangalore based NGO, Sangama that works for the sexual minorities. Her working in Sangama exposed her to activist meetings where she got to know more about the LGBT rights. Also she rose from the position of a peon to the position of director due to her sheer hard work and passion for her fellow hijras. Even her first book *Unarvum Uruvamum*(which translates to 'Feelings of the Entire Body') was published in Tamil which describes several incidents and experiences that hijras from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka underwent. She is also the first transgender to make a presence in celluloid, as she debuted in a Tamil film 'Thenavattu'.

The life of a hijra is never a smooth one. It is always a journey amidst several conflicts. Revathi says that attaining self-respect for a hijra is not an easy task; it is a kind of aspiration for them. She states: "...if born a pottai, and when living amongst pottais, it is important that a person pierces her ears and nose, and grows her hair. If you merely wear press-button earrings and a wig, no one really respects you." (Geetha 47) What earned her respect in the society is activism and protests, the NGO Sangama exposed her positive traits and today Revathi is an active writer and activist who attends seminars and conferences about LGBT issues and also gender related issues. Thus, Revathi is a perfect example of that transgender that is able to bring about the change and is still witnessing and contributing to it. *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) is the second book by Revathi and the first of its kind in English translated by V.Geetha. Revathi, in this particular book, dares to bring out the plight and sufferings that she went through being a hijra. Our heteronormative society considers the third gender as 'abnormal' and if they desire to be assimilated within the society; they must be according to the conventional heterogeneous people. Revathi breaks the taboos and several traditional beliefs that are attached to the mindset of people. Revathi's irrepressible feminine desires were daring enough to voice against the subjugating forces of the society. She ridicules the cultures imposed upon the hijras and the demand for a legitimate behaviour. Revathi, through this stirring autobiography, questions 'gender performativity' that declares heteronormativity as normal. In this context, Nivedita Menon states: "Section 377 penalizes sexual activity 'against the order of nature'. The assumption is that 'normal' sexual behaviour springs from nature, and that it has nothing to do with culture or history or human choices. But what if we consider the uncomfortable idea that the

rules regulating sexuality are produced by different human societies in their different contexts, and don't just spring from nature." (Menon 93) It is the general notion to consider 'sex' and 'gender' as similar concepts, but actually both are distinctly different concepts; 'sex' is biological concept while 'gender' is sociological concept. Menon explains that the assumption of heterosexual behaviour as normal and according to the laws of nature is a misconception. Gender roles are based on human choices and this is what Revathi highlights through her autobiographical work. In a country like India where the law had criminalized homosexuality, it is not an ancient tradition but came as late as the British colonization and thus the formulation of the law under Section 377 in Indian Penal Code. Being unknown to these conceptions, Revathi thus, questions her identity constantly. It is only when she involves with activism along the Bangalore based NGO Sangama that she understands the status of a hijra or rather other sexual minorities in India and also in the world.

The background of Revathi is an important concern in her life because she was born into a dalit family, so oppression that she was subjected to was sometimes dual. Also education that Revathi got is meager, so basically Revathi was uneducated. But the fact that concerned Revathi the most was her family's acceptance of her identity as a hijra. Born as the youngest son in a lower working class family, all the privileges came her way, but this lasted only till the time when her real identity as a woman came out in open. Revathi was also tortured and beaten severely, as her brothers thought that would make her normal. She has to go through a lot of humiliation at the hands of her own brothers and father, and this highlights the situation that most of the hijras go through. Commenting on the lack of family support in the Indian context, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai say,

"Indian cultures tend to be more of the type anthropologists call shame cultures than guilt cultures. Reputation is familial rather than individual, and even harmless behaviours that cause others to gossip about one's family are considered shameful. Having a child outside marriage is heavily disapproved of, unmarried parenthood is almost unknown, and premarital pregnancies almost always end in abortion or giving away the child in adoption. In this social context, same-sex friendships and spaces are generally more approved by parents than cross-sex friendships and mixed-gender spaces." (Vanita & Kidwai 225)

Family acceptance is very significant for a hijra because they are always discriminated on the basis of their gender identity and family is the only one place where one can find true support. But this is not the case with most of the hijras. About her effeminacy she states: "I wondered why God had chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why He could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. Why am I a flawed being, I wondered often. I might as well die, I thought. I could not study, yet pretended to, and all the time I was obsessed, confused and anxious." (Geetha 15) As stated, Revathi's initial confusion was related to her identity. She believed that she is a woman trapped in a male body and she desires to find a way out so that she attains freedom from the bodily entrapment. The constant bullying, remarks, teasing that she goes through during her childhood greatly impacted her identity and confidence. Thus the only solace she found was behind the closed doors and windows, inside the locked room of her sister's place, where she would dress up like a woman - drape her sister's saris and imitate the mannerisms of any heroine. She narrates an incident where she played the role of Chandramathi in a play 'Harishchandra'; she delves deep into the skin of the character as if a real woman would have performed. These were the only time when she felt as if she was being her real self. The turning point in her life comes when her family tortures and treats her like an animal. The consistent beatings and humiliation that she undergoes because of her being feminine becomes unbearable and she decides to escape the tyranny of family. More than enduring the tyranny, it was the life in the guise of a man that killed her every day. All she wanted was to completely transform herself into a woman which was her real identity. Going to a different city with different language and people was a daring task that Revathi undertakes. She escapes from her house stealing her mother's gold earring which she exchanges for a meager amount of money to travel to Delhi. The journey itself taught her that life as a woman or more importantly as a hijra was not going to be easy. The humiliation that she went through gave her excruciating pain, she states: "My father was not happy with my cleaning and one day, pointing to the men who worked for him, sneered at me: 'You'll learn only by drinking their piss!' I could not bear it anymore, this pain and hurt that wracked my body and mind- which I could not even mention to anybody. I decided that it would not do for me to continue to live in my parents' home." (Geetha 33)

Revathi finally steps into the world of hijras, although she already had stayed as hijra but in Delhi she began her life as a hijra by going for 'danda' (begging at shop) or sex-work or

‘baddai’ and getting nirvana – according to the rituals and traditions of the hijra community. When she went to Dindigul she attended the Goddess festival which is a tradition prevalent in South India. In South India, hijras are also known as Aravanis; the wife of prince Aravan. According to an oral retelling of Tamil *Mahabharata*, in order to achieve victory in the battle of Kurukshetra, Pandavas were supposed to please the Goddess of war by sacrificing human. The most worthy for the sacrifice were Arjuna, Krishna and Aravan, son of Arjuna and Ulupi, the Naga princess. Arjuna and Krishna had important roles to play in the war, so it was decided that Aravan would be sacrificed. But the only wish that Aravan had was a wife who would wail and mourn for his death. So Krishna disguised as Mohini married Aravan and spent the night of conjugal bliss and next morning after Aravan was sacrificed, Krishna disguised as Mohini mourned and cried like no one ever did for their spouse. In his collection of stories titled *Shikhandi and the Other Tales They Don’t Tell You*, Devdutt Pattanaik comments, “What use is a life when no woman pines for you when you die?” (Pattanaik 102)

So Revathi’s life in Delhi is mostly spent in begging at shops and earning by various means to accumulate funds to get her nirvana done. Later when she visits her home again, she faces the same brutality at the hands of her brothers who forcefully cuts her hairs in order to make her look like man and again she is compelled to elope. On reaching back to Delhi, Revathi is sent to Mumbai, from where she attains her nirvana. Nirvana was an important achievement for her because she ardently desired to turn into a woman completely. But the pain of the surgery as she describes is unbearable. Still it is desired by the hijras because for them it makes them hijra in real sense. Some hijra community considers the hijra who had undergone the operation to be of high standard and capable of doing doli-baddai. However, what Revathi through her narrative points out is the condition in which such operations take place. In India this type of surgeries are done secretly without any proper prior tests and psychological counseling unlike other countries like USA. As Revathi describes, the unbearable pain is aided by no one, not even the doctors and nurses. But Revathi states that she was ecstatic as she finally attains womanhood completely - “I felt that finally the female in me would be freed from her male body.” (Geetha 67)

Soon she became tiresome with her life at Mumbai and elopes to Bangalore to enter into sex-work. A hijra who is a sex-worker has the most miserable life and this is what Revathi describes in her narrative. Being a sex-worker and a sexual minority, she realizes that it brings all

wrong kind of attention. Although she entered into sex-work for fulfilling her sexual desires but she faces the brutal facts of life related to the lives of sex-worker. The assaults, the dangers and the rapes at the hands of clients, rowdies and also police are some of the harsh reality that she comes across. In her narration, she does not sensationalize her sufferings and pain, but the sensitive reader can feel her agony. Apart from begging and sex-work and doli-baddai, there are no employment opportunities available to the hijras. They are the most marginalized and economically down-trodden section of the society and to break this stereotype and establish a third gender identity, Revathi decides to work for her hijra community. After facing all the humiliation and discrimination from the mainstream heteronormative society, she undertakes a job at a Bangalore based NGO Sangama which worked for the sexual minorities. But here at the NGO also, she faces lots of ups and downs. Revathi always desired to live like a woman, a life where she is loved by a man, in a marital relationship. Initially when she returned to her village after her nirvana, she started her life there for few months. There she met a man and gradually they grew close to each other. The man started to visit her often. But this caused a stir in her family and she was forced to break all ties with him. Again she fell in love with a man working along with her in Sangama, to whom she gets married to. But this relationship also fails and she is left all broken. She gave in a lot into that relationship desiring a normal conjugal life filled with love but she is left all alone at the end to deal with her problems. This clearly indicates the lives of hijras whose simple desires for love and acceptance are refused and rattled at every point in life. However, she continued to work for Sangama, conducting surveys on hijras and writing a book about them. The fact that Revathi realizes and reveals is that in a country like India, hijras are the most down-trodden section of the society who are in constant struggle to become a part of the mainstream society. The desire to lead a normal life like that of any so-called heteronormative person is dependent on the hijras too. Thus, Revathi breaks the stereotypes that are attached to the lives of the hijra- staying independently, working and earning from a secured job and as an activist working for her community; in every way she stands out from her usual fellow hijras.

Revathi's autobiographical narrative does not sensationalize any of the incidents that take place neither in her life nor in the lives of her fellow hijras. One can well connect to the pain and sufferings that Revathi goes through. She battles her ways through the gender discrimination that dominates the heteronormative society and establishes a wider perception and positive attitudes

for the sexual minorities through her work as an activist. Her struggles changed the perception towards life as she states: “We want to live as women, and if we are granted the facilities that will enable us to do so, we’ll live as other women do. We were not born to beg or sex work. Circumstances, faulty laws and social hatred have left us with no course but to beg and to do sex work. Our parents have begot us like they did other children. We are also human.” (Geetha 262) She aptly questions the society as well as the government which is still unable to accept hijras as humans. She highlights the condition of the sex change operation in our country which is quite pathetic devoid of basic treatments like hormone courses and counseling, unlike other countries where sex reassignment surgery are properly aided and the patient is treated with all the basic amenities. Thus she questions, “Listen, I am not diseased, I consider myself a woman. But I possessed the form of a man. I wanted to rid myself of that form and live as a complete woman. How can that be wrong?” (Geetha 262) Thus, one can observe that despite all the brutality and humiliation and sufferings that Revathi endured, she does not keep to those sufferings rather she stands against those brutalities and humiliation to voice her identity and also her fellow hijras.

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