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Outgrowing the Authentic: Mapping Cultural (Un)Intelligibility through Performance in *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*

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Abstract:

The composition of transgender identity through narrating self is a critical feature of transgender autobiographies. The soul trapped in a body attempt to cross over to the other side of the binary gender system. This dream “materialising” into reality is a milestone in the creation of a *hijra* identity. However, the wrong body discourses facilitate a sanction to the essentialist binary system of gender. With the advent of the sociocultural aspect of gender identity formation, some of the *hijras* have taken up a more progressive step towards voicing their identity. Mapping a newer self by performing against the set notion of *hijra* ghettos might create a less intelligible identity, an identity susceptible to abjection. Nonetheless, it widens the “Open Normativities” space to flow and take an intelligible space in the long run. The autobiography, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is one of its kind in the literature from wrong body discourses as she is against the essentialism imbued by the clan. How she masquerades hyperbolic femininity subverts the heteronormative notion of gender through the continuous reiteration of performance and reflects the imitative structure of all genders. Hence, this paper aims to explore a historical shift in the formation of transgender identity through performance. Understanding this shift embarks the transgression of a transgender in the truest sense. Furthermore, the paper explores this shift by borrowing the

major theoretical underpinning of “cultural intelligibility” from Judith Butler’s work *Gender Trouble* (1990). This paper will also examine how transgressive performances lead to the formation of “Open Normativities” and create counterpublic discourses.

Keywords: “Authentic”, Transgender, “Open Normativities”, Performance, Cultural Intelligibility.

Introduction

The debate of authenticity concerning the gender-defined identity of a trans person is old but not outdated. Philosophers have incessantly addressed the ontological, metaphysical, structuralist and psychoanalytic view of “being” a certain gender. What constitutes the core/essence of our presence as a gendered human being is a metaphysical question. According to the metaphysics of substance, the subject is a pre-gendered person who is the bearer of all essential and non-essential attributes. In this regard, Lauren Bialystok in her essay defines “Authenticity as a condition of fidelity to an inner truth, a core substrate that is often cashed out as “the real self” or one’s “essence” (122). Poststructuralist and postfeminist philosophers and theorists dismiss the questions of the core as essentialist humdrum because the idea deals with the substantial attributes of a person. The contemporary feminist debate rejects the concept of essentialism as an outmoded way of looking at the sex/gender binary and perceives “gender” to be more of a constructed identity created by social and cultural interaction. However, before rejecting this term altogether, an exegesis of the term “authentic” or “essential” is required, especially concerning the trans identity. One must enquire whether the term is as immutable as it seems or if the term has expanded over time. For this, we need to consider the standpoint of gender theorist Diana Fuss. Fuss observes in her work *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (1989) that “few other words in the vocabulary of contemporary critical theory are so persistently maligned, so little interrogated and so predictably summoned as a term of

infallible critique” (xi). Also, while tracing the individual subjectivity of a trans person the questions of “Authenticity” become worthy of an initial discussion. Trans persons often invoke this concept of authenticity while defining their unique gender identity that differs from their assigned sex. The need for complete gender transformation through sex reassignment surgery is dependent on an inner core that emanates from the wrong body discourses. This study involves a peep into the life of the third gender from India, the *hijras* and how some *hijras* outgrow the notion of authenticity and perform alternately to the established norms of heteropatriarchal society. This performance includes an alternate stylization of the body against the already repeated practices of the said community. Now, expressing oneself against the dominant grain can act doubly. On one hand, it becomes a risky endeavour because it can push disparate identities into an “abject” space. This abjection can lead to ignominy, dehumanisation and cultural unintelligibility. On the other hand, with the Foucauldian idea of power and production, newer identities emerge because power is not only prohibitive and regulatory but productive in nature. To render existing hegemonic identity categories intelligible and powerful, it invariably creates illegitimate and deviant categories that “exceed the limit of cultural intelligibility” (60). To follow and trace the question of authenticity/realness in trans life, this article follows theoretical underpinning borrowed from Butler’s theory of “cultural intelligibility,” wherein Butler posits formation of gender through, “a regulated process of repetition” (22). This means to make trans life legible and authentic to the readers through autobiographies the trans writer must reiterate or repeat the ways of their predecessors. The trans person’s identity become legible through performative use of language and repetition. To become a culturally intelligible “subject” one must conform to the societal standard. The grace of intelligibility is such that it can qualify a subject as “legible, “humane” and “liveable”. As Butler posits, “persons become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (22).

The Indian equivalent of the trans community from the west are “Hijras, Khusras, asexual, middle-sexed, neutrals, eunuchs, etc” (Sharma 2). The multiple variations of gender non-conformist identities who defy heteronormativity belong to the trans community.

“Trans” is an umbrella term that encompasses a spectrum of gender identities and embodiments of persons whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth. Trans includes, but is not limited to those who identify as transgender, transsexual, nonbinary, Two spirits, trans women, trans men, male to female (MTF), Female to Male (MTF), trans feminine, trans masculine, genderqueer, genderfluid, bigender and agender, among others. (Vipond, 19)

“He (hijra) is a third gender role in India, who is neither male nor female but contains the elements of both” (Nanda 26). They see themselves as “Tritiya panthi” or “Tritiya Prakriti” which literally translates into third gender and third nature (Kalra 5). The *hijra* community from India lie close to the western trans identities. Their identification with the popular trans subjectivity of wrong body discourses binds the two categories together. However, there are also those from the *hijra* community who do not claim to be born in the wrong bodies. Hence, this paper exclusively studies the self-life narrative of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. Tripathi was assigned “male” sex at the time of her birth and she later discovered that her gender identity is not in coherence with her assigned sex. In tandem, this paper probes into the question of authenticity in *hijra* autobiographies and how individuals like Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi take a step ahead to outgrow the “so-called” authentic condition of the third gender in India. Gender identity is essential in the making of the transgender self and the autobiographical act paves the way for it. The act of articulating by the “I” provides a self-composition in which transsexuality and embodiment are deeply entwined. “The narrative transition of autobiography allows the somatic transition of transsexuality in an immediate and material sense” (Poser 101). Hence, transgender autobiographies play a multi-faceted role in mapping

trans-identities and subjectivity. For both the readers and writer the narratives reveal a subjectivity in transition. These narratives of selfhood challenge the dominant system, at the same time grapples with the political situation and repeatedly marked by it. Autobiography enables its transgendered practitioners to reclaim the public space which they are denied after years of institutional, linguistic, and epistemic erasure. As Evan Vipond in his essay observes, writing about trans identity is also a revolutionary act as it challenges the binary code of gender and dislodges the hegemonic function of heteronormativity. Moreover, it also paves the way for a potentially more fluid space which accommodates the existence of various subjectivities. This space involving fluid acceptance is called Open Normativities by Alexis Shotwell. However, this fluid acceptance is not “voluntarist” in nature. She criticises the voluntarist approach to change and opposes those political projects which assume that individual can change themselves and their political circumstances through their agency and will without considering the current reality and historical past. However, she also opposes absolute “normativity” because it is the constrictive and restrictive force that limits multiple subjectivities. Therefore, open normativity might be considered a way to counter the force of normativity. Alexis Shotwell defines the term as, “Collectively crafted ways of being that shape subjectivities oriented towards widespread flourishing” (Shotwell 1016). It is like endorsing a way of being distinct from the idea of “normalistaion.” It is a majoritarian idea that undermine minor differences and negatively aims towards universalising a singular idea. Although “open normativities” might seem like an extension of constrictive normativity. However, it seems to converge with the idea of “coalitional politics” given by Butler in some ways.

Gender is complexity whose totality is permanently deferred never fully what it is at the given juncture in time. An open coalition then will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an

open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.” (Butler 22)

Therefore, to qualify as a mainstream *hijra* one must travel through the coherent road of this journey. Clare Hemmings call these repeated reiterative patterns of existence as “technologies of trans life writing” which incorporate without failing the principal factors of the wrong body discourses and “cross-gendered identification.” The idea of “transsexual” people being “trapped in the wrong body” was proposed in the book *The Transsexual Phenomenon* by German Endocrinologist Harry Benjamin in 1966. Tripathi in her autobiographical narrative, *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* (2015) highlights similar tropes like “technologies” by Hemmings. Tripathi reminisces about her early childhood and recounts of a vivid image of associating with the feminine gender. It projects the presence of wrong body discourses and cross-gender identification in her autobiography. She says, “I now myself began feeling attracted to boys in general...I wondered if this happened because inwardly I was a woman” (Tripathi 10). Even though Laxmi’s narrative is the first of its kind from the Hijra community a few other narratives were trickling their way up like *Truth about me: A Hijra life story* (2010) by A. Revathi and *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey* (2013) by Living Smile Vidya. It is a relatively new phenomenon in memoir writing from India. However, the emergence of a *hijra* body was not what Butler mentions as an “impossible scene . . . body that has not yet been given a social definition, a body that is, strictly speaking, not accessible to us” (5). In India, the *hijra* bodies occupies an intelligible space as the third gender of this country. However, with the advent of colonialism, the British officials ensured a planned institutional erasure of *hijras*. Even though they have a legacy that traces back to the Vedic and pre-Vedic times. The transgender in India have a preestablished language, customs and practices that legitimise their being. They distribute themselves into households, colloquially known as *Gharanas*. These houses are run by the *Nayaks*- the leader of a household. There are seven

hijra gharanas in the subcontinent. Needless to say, the rich legacy of the past has a sordid appearance in the present. These organised structures have transformed into dingy ghettos. These places force *hijras* to earn a living through dancing at the wedding or childbirth, begging and prostitution. These occupations are the specific gender roles for the third gender in the subcontinent. *Hijras* are colonised in terms of dressing and vocations. They have been consistently following the singular gender trajectory. They follow the path of their predecessors to feel authentic as a third-gender community in India. As Posser points out that “previous transsexual autobiographies provide a narrative map” these documents help the present transgender persons to repeat and authenticate their own experiences. Consequently, it is bound to replicate the single experience and hegemonies’ normative structure over multiple subjectivities. So, a transgender person must risk her intelligibility by authoring an incoherent narrative that ceases to match the previous one. This willing abjection can be a step towards outgrowing authenticity.

Tripathi begins a linear trajectory that begins with a childhood awareness of cross-gender identification and the soul of a female trapped in a male’s body. She does not follow the path of a third gender right away instead she becomes one later on in her life. In the beginning, she found solace in the gay community of Maheshwari Udyan. The group welcomes her into the community as another effeminate gay man. However, Laxmi admits that she felt alienated from the community as they did not consider themselves women.

She recounts, “I wondered why they did not regard themselves as women, for, to me, then, being homosexual and being a woman meant the same thing . . . when I was attracted to men, I did not think of myself as a man. I thought of myself as a woman” (Tripathi 46).

The queer theory emerged in the 1990s as a response against the binary and heteronormative structure of set gender and sexuality patterns. It is an umbrella term which

includes various identities and the trans community is one of them. However, it also becomes critical to point out the alienation between the queer and the transgender person standpoint at the theoretical level. The disavowal stems from the queer theory as they discredit the presence of heterosexuality undermining the desire of a transgender to be a heterosexual. Similarly, the other coming-of-age stories risk the usurping of peculiar individualities of a trans person. Jay Posner in his work discusses the importance of a transgender person in the ambit of queer theory because a trans person manifests a sincere image of a queer as it jumps manifold boundaries together. They cross the barrier of sex, gender and Sexuality at once. A similar disagreement is manifested by Tripathi when she decides to avoid the group and looks elsewhere to manifest her feminine identity. Cross-dressing and dancing came naturally to Laxmi and she uses it as a tool to reclaim the feminine space. She took upon the act of transvestism and began performing in the dance bars of Mumbai. She admits that she was most comfortable while carrying out a drag of hyperbolic femininity and the resultant effect was the moment of “ultimate transgression.” Butler points out that, “queer theory has written of transitions as discursive but it has not explored the bodliness of gendered crossing. The concomitant of this observation of embodiment is that the transgendered subject has typically had centre stage over the transexual: whether s/he is a tranvestite, drag queen or butch woman.” (Poser 50). In a similar vein, Harry Benjamin points out that “The transvestite wants to be accepted in the society as a member of the opposite sex; he or she wants to play the role as completely and as successfully as possible” (Benjamin, 1966). Dancing and transvestism bring Laxmi closer to performing the feminine. Unlike Revathi who desired to simply “pass” as a “woman” and dreams of domestic life as a mother and a wife. Laxmi does not aspire only to ‘pass’ as an authentic woman. She formally joins the *hijra* community in the year 1998. Tripathi becomes the *chela* of Latanayak at Byculla, Mumbai. She does it through a ritualistic way of becoming a *hijra*. The *reet* follows a small christening ceremony where a new *hijra* is presented with symbolic *Jogjanam* sarees

and covered with a community *dupatta*. The awareness that she does not want to situate herself binary order of things. She does not merely want to pass as a woman. Her first step towards outgrowing the authentic relies on her acceptance of inhabiting the in-between of gender binaries. She recounts, “When I became a Hijra, a great burden was lifted off my head. I felt relaxed. I was now neither a man nor a woman. I am a hijra. I had my own identity. No longer did I feel like an alien” (Tripathi 120). However, we also see a deep-seated desire in Laxmi to belong somewhere. She wants her experiences to be legitimate. Laxmi borrows short-term intelligibility for a longer term of cultural abjection as she could not prescribe to the established notions of the community as well. She was a rule-breaker on multiple levels. She does not follow the mandate of abandoning the family and residing in the *hijra* community. Instead, she brought her *chelas* to live a life of comfort and riches in her apartment. Tripathi is educated and she never indulges in the act of prostitution and begging. On the other hand, she turns into a transgender rights activist and celebrity from India and she is known all over the world. She gladly takes jibes and rebukes from the *hijra* community to follow her multifarious passions of acting, dancing, and activism. Most importantly, Laxmi never transitions anatomically. She does not opt for castration or sex reassignment surgery to transform completely. Readers might find her transgender journey to be unreliable and deceitful. In one of the instances, Laxmi admits that she feared a so-called expose as medical practitioners are considered to be the reliable gatekeepers who allow the swift and authentic movement of people in the trans space. She recounts an interrogation with a government official, “yes you can get a passport. But what is the proof that you are a hijra? . . . I had no such certificate and I have no such surgery done because I am not castrated” (Tripathi 200). Janice Raymond, a radical feminist, argues that “without surgical advancement, transsexuality simply wouldn’t exist.” This simply might appear as an inauthentic way of being a transgender person or a *hijra*, as the performance is not in agreement with the social category in question. So, one might argue that Laxmi is a

transvestite and not a transgender. As Benjamin has pointed out the difference between the transvestite and the transexual in one of his earlier text, a transvestite can never get himself operated but a transsexual singular and absolute goal is to get themselves operated. However, one must argue that the *modus operandi* of viewing gender has changed since then and to meaningfully look at the conflict of realness/ authenticity one must approach Lauren Bialystok's idea on authenticity, "When I speak of authenticity, I am referring to an inherently first-person description of selfhood that takes as its referent only the self in question, not intersubjective opinion or social categories" (Bialystok 122). So, it can be deduced that Tripathi has treble flunked the notion of cultural intelligibility and undermined the significant reiterations of the three prevalent social categories. At the outset, she undermines the basic sex-gender construct and aims to cross over to the other side. Furthermore, she never opts for castration or sex reassignment surgery. She does not follow the single-accepted journey of a transgender in the preoperative phase, sex reassignment surgery and post-operative phase. Apart from that, she flunks the rules of the *hijra* community to live on her terms. Therefore, Laxmi carves a path of cultural un (intelligibility) for herself to compose her unique trans narrative. She willingly follows the path of abjection.

Conclusion

To conclude, then: *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*, the autobiography of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, is a unique account of the journey taken to compose a trans identity. Laxmi's narrative was greatly informed by both the *hijra* traditions and prominent Western queer discourses. The path that Laxmi carved out for herself risks cultural intelligibility and coherence as her narrative eschews the prominent tropes of trans narrative. Nevertheless, it opens multiple avenues to perform gender differently, side-lining the binary codes of essential gender. In doing so, Laxmi also takes one step ahead in outgrowing the notion of authenticity. Her gender identity is a humane manifestation and a unique embodiment of trans subjectivity. It provides another

opportunity to practice open normativity that discusses the collective growth of all identities without hierarchizing any single dominant identity marker. This autobiography can also be read as a blatant critique of “transphobia” and the stigma produced in the case of transgender persons as not being a “real man” or “real woman” and helps in redeeming the literal and constructed image of the transgenders as monsters. For her gendered readers, she brings newer possibilities to the fore. Later, these newer possibilities will lead to a shift in the understanding of trans subjectivity that will include many contrasting narratives and conflicting embodiments. One must also critically view the power of trans autobiography in constituting the gendered self of a trans person.

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