

Long Essay

QUEER ARTICULATION OF SELF: INDIAN *HIJRA* AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Kuhu Sharma Chanana
Swami Shraddhanand College, Delhi

Introduction

The absorption of the specific *hijra* (transgender) identity within the larger umbrella of queer writings has been problematic from many angles. On the one hand, this kind of assimilation provides benefits emerging out of coalition politics as it includes all sorts of gender and sexual minorities, but on the other hand, queer writings have been hugely partial to gays at the expense of lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders. Thus, there is a great need to create a specific literary and critical corpus of transgender literature so that the assertion of their individual trans-selves should not get subsumed within the ambit of privileged gay writings. However, in India, there are still very few specimens of *hijra* literature. Whether it is their *nirvanam* ceremonies (emasulation), *danda* (sex-work in *hijra* terminology), *badhai* dance or their death rituals, the false assumptions surrounding *hijra* identities can only be mitigated by their own first-hand accounts spread across all classes and culture. Here, recorded history in the form of autobiographies plays a vital role. No wonder Revathi's *Our Lives, Our Words, The Truth About Me* and *A Life in Trans Activism*, Vidya's *Living Smile Vidya: I am Vidya*, Laxminarayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* and *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*, and Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* are valuable signatures in this context.

Though *hijras* have their own specific cultural ethos and differ in many ways from transgenders in general, there are many overlaps as well, and therefore, while analysing *hijra* autobiographies, I am not treating them as mutually exclusive categories. There is inclusion of an anthology, *Our Lives, Our Words*, by Revathi because the individual

experience must also sink into multiple voices and vice versa. There is an important observation in this regard made by Sidonie Smith: “If the anthology acts as a democratic space through its multiple voices, the autobiography, that genre, is most associated with individualism” (1987: 3). The peculiar mix of anthology and autobiography creates that much needed fissure where the de-centring of the monolithic voice takes place by replacing it with multiple voices emerging from different cultural and social vantage points. Similarly, by mixing two genres (anthology and autobiography), there appears to be an emergence of fluid multidimensional transgender voices that cannot be fixed in one set of frames. Therefore, I have put both these two (autobiography and anthology) forms of transgender literature into one group in order to document the multiplicity of the trans-entities. In this respect, the inclusion of Revathi’s *A Life in Trans Activism* is also quite important as the first half of the book is about the trials and tribulations of her personal life but the second half deals with the narratives of trans men (one of the most marginalised entities within the transgender community) in their own voices.

Another interesting aspect about the publication of these autobiographies and anthology is that they are published by both queer activist press like Yoda and by reputed commercial publishing houses like Penguin. Indeed, the consumption of these autobiographies and anthologies is also an important aspect and requires attention. Their economic viability becomes an issue in this context. Shridevi K. Nair, in her Ph.D. dissertation (though talking about the lesbian anthology), gives a reason behind the ready consumption of queer anthologies and autobiographies. She attributes it to the changing social and cultural climate of India. To quote her: “Within the economies of pleasure – circulated most visibly by advertising, film and print media – sexual desire has come to be seen in highly individualistic ways among the upper and middle classes. Rather than centring on reproduction and family, since the early 1990s, sexual desire has come to be focused inordinately on the right of individuals – men and women – to engage in and experience pleasure. While this is certainly directed at romanticising heterosexuality, it has also given rise equally to framings of sexual desire in ways that have people reach out to consume artifacts of pleasure – and books have constituted a large part of that consumption for these classes” (2009: 52). Apart from this, the postcolonial and postmodern ideas of troubling literature and asking whose story is worth telling have contributed greatly towards the emergence of transgender stories in different forms and genres, be it fiction,

anthology or autobiography. Leah Price, the author of *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot*, talks about the uneasy suspicion surrounding the genre of anthology due to the ‘cut out of context’ aspect of the anthology where only a certain kind of part is included.

Yet another rupture created by the *hijra* autobiographies is that they could exhibit structures of hierarchies within oppressed groups. Vidya, being a dalit transgender, has catalogued herself as a doubly marginalised entity – as a dalit and a transwoman – and talks about oppression within the *hijra* community on account of her lower-caste status. However, at a seminar at Kalady (Kerala) on 29 September 2016, Kalki Subramaniam, the founder of the trans-empowering projects like Sahodari and Thiruaingai.net (matrimonial site for transgenders), had a heated discussion with a documentary film-maker in the audience on this topic. When the film-maker spoke about Vidya’s assertion regarding the disparity between upper and lower-caste *hijras* within the transgender community, Kalki’s retort was that “(we) all are outcasts and outcasts have the same caste and religion so the question of disparity does not arise”. She openly talks about her differences with Vidya on this issue.

Now, the question is whether this is a new kind of transnormativity in the line of homonormativity where all differences and uncomfortable dispositions are ironed out in order to project only one variety of transgenders that do not create radical ruptures in the heteropatriarchal structures. Revathi’s latest autobiography, *A Life in Trans Activism*, exposes these kinds of hierarchal prejudices prevalent in the transgender community when she discusses the systematic silencing and invisibilising of MTF (male turned female) within transgender activism. In the introduction to this book, Revathi states: “The challenges, the triumphs and difficulties in my arduous journey as an activist form the core of this book. An unusual feature of this book is that it captures the narratives of trans men (female to male trans individuals), a highly invisibilised and marginalised gender minority. Most people are not even aware that such a group exists. And, sadly, even most members of the *hijra* community do not accept them” (2016: XIV). The destructive phenomena of ‘pink-washing’ and ‘pink-economy’ are all parts of homonormativity. In the same line, there appears to be an emergence of a certain kind of transnormativity. In fact, the establishing of a matrimonial site by Kalki for transgender men and women indicates a conformity to heterosexual pattern of marriage rather than the adoption of new modes of loving and living outside the confines of the marriage,

towards which a radical trans-identity could aspire. This kind of straight-jacketing at one level is defended on account of having an equal right to marry, but on the other, it certainly gives impetus to the transnormative mainstreaming. Thus, the inclusion of anthology and various kinds of autobiographies is important because these different genres bring forth not only the voices of the privileged *hijras* (on account of caste, education and financial background) but also provide a space for the articulation of the lives of those who are underprivileged within the transgender community. As is evident when we compare Laxmi and Manobi's autobiographies with Vidya and Revathi's personal accounts.

Deviant desire and autobiographies have a long-standing relationship, especially in the Indian context. The identities that cannot find articulation anywhere, find their manifestation through this genre and one of the finest examples is that prior to the public exposition of lesbian desire in India, we got a clear-cut expression of it in Kamla Das's autobiography, *My Story*, as early as in 1976. Globally also, autobiographies remain one of the most popular forms of the transgender literary expressions. One of the best-known activists Kate Bronstein's autobiography *Gender Outlaw* (1994) is part autobiography, part manifesto and part fashion guide. Roberta Close's sensational autobiography, *Much Pleasure Roberta Close* (1998), opened the flood-gates for the unabashed articulation of transgender sexuality (she talked explicitly about her affairs with many international celebrities). Laxmi's second autobiography, *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*, seems to be in the same line; and successfully annihilates the repressive model of transgender sexuality. Michael Dillon was the first person to transition from female to male both surgically and hormonally. This got documented in *Michael Née Laura* (1989). *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (1967) records Jorgensen's experience regarding sex-change surgery. The detailed analysis of *nirvanam* ceremonies (*hijra*'s emasculation) in Revathi, Vidya and Manobi's autobiographies appears to follow the same thread of description of sexual transformation. Another in this line is Elbie's *Man into Woman*, that draws a distinction between homosexuals and transsexuals. Renne Richards's autobiography, *Second Serve*, is a tale of her efforts to fight against the discrimination meted out to transgenders in the world of sport. We have the story of Shanti Soundarajan, an Indian runner who was stripped of her 800-meter silver medal at Doha due to her intersex identity. But her story has not been recorded.

Hence, we have numerous parallels between Indian *hijra*

autobiographies and the articulation of the self by the transgender individuals across the world. But what distinguishes these autobiographies from their global counterparts is that *hijras* are cultural entities too with their own set of rules, rituals, customs, alternative economic dispensations and family structures. No wonder, these autobiographies, by and large, also serve as ethnographic windows by giving us a peek into their various ethnic dispositions like (a) *Guru-Chela Parampara* (b) *Nirvanam* (castration practices) and the reason of the superiority of the *Thayamma Nirvanam* over a medical operation (c) circumstances that push them to *danda* (sex-work) (d) the reasons for the distinction between *badhai* and *kandra hijras* (e) the hierarchal dispositions within the *hijra* community (f) the rituals surrounding their inclusion in the *hijra* community (g) their coded language (in order to hide social subjugation) (h) their expectations from the state, role in nation-building, lack of access to medical health and consequently their own crude methods of medication (i) exclusive *hijra* myths and the tales popular within the community (j) *kothi* and *panthi* kinship and the alternative *hijra* family structure (k) ABVA (AIDS *Bedbhav Virodhi Andolan*), and transgenders' specific marginalisation vis-a-vis AIDS. On the basis of the above discussion, we can assume that these autobiographies give us an insight into the closely guarded world of the *hijras*.

Another issue that differentiates these autobiographies with the rest of the transgender memoirs across the world is that *hijras* have a strongly coded specific language primarily for self-preservation. However, when studied from the perspective of queer aesthetics, this coded language of *hijras* creates an important intervention in the development of the specific queer language necessary for individualistic assertion. This was once pointed out by R. Raj Rao in one of his interviews that he gave to me and it got published in the book, *An Evening Rainbow*. He argues in favour of developing a specific queer language which could be instrumental in the rise of queer aesthetics. To quote his words: "I certainly use language to subvert and to shock. When Bulbul Sharma reviewed *The Boyfriend* in *India Today*, she said the language was not elegant. Many other reviewers of my work have expressed similar ideas. But this is not necessary because I don't know how to use 'elegant' language. After all, my training is in that elegant of elegant literatures, English Literature. Perhaps it is because I do not want to use elegant language and deliberately shun it, for it does not suit my aesthetic purpose. One of my ongoing concerns, in fact, has been to evolve a queer aesthetics which can do justice to gay writings. That aesthetics would

have much to do with the hybridisation and even corruption of language. It is likewise with other literatures, such as *dalit* literature. I think this also amounts to being experimental with language, which I would say I have always been” (2012: 209).

Indeed, all over the world there is a tendency in the more marginalised groups, within the sexual minorities, to break away from the dominant queer language and coin their own vocabulary for the assertion of their unique self. The *hijra* terminology is also an extension in this line of thought. Words like *badhai*, *kandra*, *nirvana* and *danda* are part of a unique *hijra* language. From this perspective, the inclusion of *hijra* autobiographies brings forth these words, codes and coinages extensively, which one is unable to find in the fictional writings on *hijras* by non-transgender writers. The major issues that bind these disparate autobiographies in a single thread are the depictions of emasculation ceremonies and their relationship with *hijra* identity, the mainstreaming of *hijras* or transgenders through meaningful assimilation in educational institutes and their own understanding of their gender dysphoria. This article primarily centres around these issues.

Emasculation (*Nirvanam*) and the Expansive Understanding of the Term

There is a mention of a ‘*sannyasi* rock’ in Revathi’s book, and interestingly enough, Gayatri Reddy gives an entirely different connotation to the term ‘*sannyasi*’ with reference to *hijras* in her seminal work, *With Respect to Sex*. Citing examples from the interpretations of Ashish Nandy and Gandhi, she contends: “... posited the ability to transcend the man-woman dichotomy through a self-conscious aspiration for androgyny. The desire to become ‘God’s eunuch’, as he puts it, was superior to both the essences of masculinity and femininity” (2006: 29). This indubitably helps in reinventing the idea of masculinity when seen from the perspective of androgyny. In her second autobiography, *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi uses the same tool of androgyny to question the stringent idea of masculinity. She gives constant references to *ardhmarishwar* throughout the text. She also cites the example of king Bhangashvana (as narrated in the *Mahabharata*) who lived his life both as a man and woman and then finally chose to be a woman. In an imaginative way, Laxmi uses the chromosomal structure to burst the myth of unadulterated masculinity. She affirms: “If you think about it, a woman is complete – she is XX and therefore complete. It is the man who is XY and

hence has the woman in him. This ‘manliness’, then, is just a show, nothing but a convenient construct, a pretence to keep patriarchy alive, to keep women tamed. I am fortunate to be able to traverse through both genders so well” (2016: 10). So, starting from the Gandhian idea of ‘God’s eunuch’ that incorporated the concept of androgyny (as illustrated by Laxmi also), Laxmi is able to show trans corporeality as more holistic in nature.

The process of emasculation or *nirvana*, which has come under scrutiny due to the crude methods that are employed to execute it, in one way symbolically suggests celibacy. Also, not having a family (that is supposedly the primary reason for materialistic creeds), along with their social activism which centres around egalitarian ethics (Revathi, Vidya and Laxmi, all three of them have worked extensively for the uplift of *hijras*), makes *hijras* contenders for a unique and individualised form of asceticism in a highly imaginative and suggestive fashion. But this is an oblique way of viewing the phenomenon, because one notices that the very first paragraph of Vidya’s autobiography opens with the description of her journey to achieve *nirvanam* (emasculation) and a major part of the text is replete with gory descriptions of emasculation and lack of medical care. But Vidya’s relentless efforts to save money for *nirvanam* are reflective of her keen desire to get the gender of her own choice and she is able to bear any amount of pain for this. As an educated transgender, it has been extremely difficult for Vidya to suffer the humiliation of begging (as she refused to do sex-work) in order to save money for *nirvanam*: “Nirvana! How long I had waited for it! What humiliation I had suffered! Obsessed with it, I had mortgaged my pride, my anger, my honour – I had even begged on the streets to achieve the end” (2014: 3). The same kind of obsession with *nirvanam* can be found in Revathi’s book. The *hijras* who get emasculated are revered within the *hijra* community but those who go through ‘*thayamma nirvanam*’ (which is done by a *hijra* without anaesthesia, through crude methods) are considered far more superior.

Hence the degree of pain is directly proportional to the amount of reverence that an emasculated *hijra* will receive. The question is whether it is indicative of a certain kind of body discipline as obliquely referred to by Gayatri, or there is something more sinister in it. As pointed out earlier, one can find the same kind of obsession with *nirvanam* even in Revathi’s book. Even after going through the horrific experience at a doctor’s clinic during emasculation, a senior fellow-*hijra* admonishes Revathi for crying out in pain. This gives us an insight into the world of *hijras* where emasculation is a key

currency for gaining respect. To quote from the text: "...for *pottais*, an operation is a veritable rebirth. Those who get *nirvanam* done win special praise in the community if we want to live as complete women, that is possible only after we undergo this operation. See it's not easy to become a woman. You have to suffer to be one. What would you have done, if you had to undergo a *thayamma* operation? You think this operation by the doctor is bad, but if you'd had the other?" (2010: 82). Thus, the function of *nirvanam* is not only to craft a so-called real woman by removing the penis and testicles but also to satiate a latent sadomasochistic desire in *hijras* that emanates from internalised transphobia. That is why the clinically done emasculation is considered inferior as compared to the *thayamma* one because it involves excruciating pain. In the *hijra* community it is believed that the more the bloodshed and pain, the more are the chances of being a complete woman. Revathi gives a detailed description of it in these words: "In my heart of hearts I was afraid to opt for a *thayamma* operation. On the other hand, I knew that those who had *nirvanam* done by that method enjoyed a special status and were respected. But more than anything, I was eager to become a woman and that was all that mattered to me. Back then I thought that in order to turn feminine, all I needed to do was get rid of this male object and I would become free to be a woman, like others" (2010: 66).

Indeed *nirvanam*, and that too the *thayamma* one, holds special importance in the eyes of the *hijra* community. Since we live in a society where we are comfortable only with the bipolar method of organising gender and sexuality, we are conditioned and comfortable to see only the clear-cut distinction between 'us' and 'them' and the paradigm of gender and sexuality is not an exception to this. Indeed, anything that falls in between creates serious anxieties in 'us'. Patently, the twin and liminal disposition of trans-identity creates a serious discomfort both in the heterosexuals and homosexuals. Obviously, transgenders suffer transphobic subjugation both from the heterosexuals and the homosexuals. Little wonder, transphobia is much more difficult to counter as compared to homophobia and consequently transgenders have a high degree of internalised transphobia as they are at once gender and sexual deviants. Hence the need to fit into a man/woman dichotomy is very high in them and results in the sadomasochistic desire of emasculation as it operates at two levels.

Firstly, along with the hormonal therapy, it contributes towards making a so-called complete woman; and secondly, the whole

process of mutilation through *nirvanam* symbolically suggests self-hatred emanating from internalized transphobic anxiety. Thus, at one level, far from the metaphorical interpretation of *nirvanam* given by ethnographers like Gayatri Reddy, the process entails a lot of self-inflicted violence on the transbody. Indeed, a certain degree of sensitisation is needed so that the false glorification of *nirvanam* within the *hijra* community could cease. Although Laxmi has never undergone *nirvanam*, she calls it a spiritual process in her autobiography, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. She also refers to *hijras* as *sadhus*, as they have to leave their homes. It is however really strange that despite working in NGOs and being known faces of transgender activism, both Vidya and Revathi have not only gone for *nirvanam* but in the later part of their autobiographies, have not exhibited any regret for doing this. Definitely, we can counter this argument on the basis of promoting the idea of individual will and choice but somehow their position as transgender activists makes one feel uncomfortable about their absolute silence on any kind of critique of *nirvanam*. In this regard, I have found Laxmi's autobiography quite progressive. She is not castrated and openly acknowledges it, and feels no need to be castrated in order to feel and look like a woman. To my mind it is an affirmative stance as she refuses to be essentialist. However, Raj Rao's way of interpreting it is that Laxmi has compromised by not opting for castration as this would displease her family. However, the point is that, embracing a *hijra* identity and convincing her family to accept this were much more difficult tasks as compared to the act of castration. And since Laxmi states that she has never done sex-work (activists like Ashok Rao Kavi mention that many *hijras* do not opt for castration as they are at times involved with passive gay men as sex-workers), her retention of the penis could not be for this reason also. According to Raj Rao, as mentioned in the afterword of Laxmi's autobiography: "To the extent that Laxmi is not castrated, she may be said to encompass the ambivalent principle of queer theory. However, in her case... this is not intentional, even though I have called her anti-essentialist. There is a fine distinction between wanting to be ambivalent in the ideological sense and wanting, simply, to have the best of both the worlds; in Laxmi's case it seems to be the latter" (2015: 204).

I completely disagree with this line of thinking because Laxmi's suffocation with the code of conduct of the *hijra* community is very apparent and she has fought against it valiantly. She has come out of the clutches of her guru, which is an extremely difficult task in the *hijra* community. Also, she appeared on Big Boss (A popular

television show) despite death threats from her community. There is not a single stance where she has compromised against her will. Her entire life journey is marked by her anti-essentialist dispositions and therefore considering this act of not opting for castration as a compromise is highly problematic. Her choice can be read as one of questioning unnecessary traditions through the disruption of the hierarchal fabric of the *guru-chela parampara*. Laxmi, who has silicon breasts along with a penis, and wears a sari, seems to epitomise the concept of *ardhnarishwar* and is a true transgender person in every sense of the word. Thus, at one level, all over the world, gender dysphoria is recognised as a major cause of anxiety in the people who experience it, but at another level, not going through the hazardous effects of SRS (sex reassignment surgery) and accepting a transbody are real affirmative steps.

Transgenders and the Stringent Normativity of Educational Institutions

Time and again, emphasis has been laid on the fact that education is the ultimate means of empowerment. Indeed, the rehabilitation of the transgenders in terms of job opportunities is only possible when they have been given proper education. The narratives by Revathi, and specially Manobi and Vidya, clearly indicate the subjugation suffered by people with trans identities at educational institutions. The daily bullying and oppression are of such levels that hardly any *hijra* is able to finish his/her education at the college level. These experiences further shape their life of poverty and exploitation. The very first chapter of the anthology, *Our Lives, Our Words* by Revathi is entitled “Childhood and Schooling” and is replete with gory details of the opprobrium suffered by Roja, Santhi Amma, Ranjitha, Aruna and Sundari. They recollect that not only did the students create an unpalatable environment for them by constant name-calling, but that teachers also contributed a great deal to their ordeal. During sport, there was constant questioning on playing ‘feminine’ games like *kho-kho*. In fact, given their proclivity for certain kinds of sport, even the sport teachers exploited them, as has been mentioned by Sundari in these words: “During games period, boys would play *kabbadi*, cricket and ball games. I would play skipping rope. The sports master caught onto this point and forcefully had sex with me” (2011: 15). The verbal humiliations, meted out to many of these so-called effeminate boys were of such level that at a tender age they were unable to cope with it.

We find one such instance in the life-story of Aruna. To quote from the text: "Looking at my gait, gestures and speech, my teachers would often say, 'you are not a metal, but an alloy'. I was very good in studies. I stood first in class, but still everyone teased me. I used to get very upset over that. One day in our chemistry class the teacher was taking a class on metals. He said, 'Iron is a metal. It will be heavy. An alloy will look like iron, but it won't be as heavy as that. It does not have a proper form. It will not have a specific shape. You know an example of an alloy would be this boy sitting here', and pointed at me. 'He appears to be male, but his behaviour is like a female's', he continued. The whole class broke into laughter. I felt ashamed" (2011: 12). This kind of incessant mental torture created such deep wounds in the heart of Aruna that a bright child like her left school at the age of fifteen.

Now nothing can be more difficult for the uplift of transgender communities as the fact that children are forced to leave school. Even Vidya, who has successfully finished her master's in Linguistics, narrates numerous instances of ridicule in the educational institutions she attended. Similarly, Manobi's account of her experiences at school and university spaces is soaked with evidence of subjugation. It is a matter of great shame that university spaces, which are supposedly autonomous and gender-neutral domains, are imbued with serious prejudices. I was a member of the seven-member committee constituted by the UGC to formulate reservation policies for transgenders in university spaces. The committee also discussed making the general environment of the educational institutions more transgender friendly. In the process of discussion, what emerged was that unless we sensitise teachers and students, the reservation policy for transgenders would not help beyond a point. And one way of sensitising is through changes in the curriculum. *Hijra* literature should be part of essential readings, and workshops should be organised about transgender lives in university spaces. Undoubtedly, negotiations between formal and informal curriculum are of primary significance because through them essential slippages can be created in the taken-for-granted heteronormativity of university spaces. In the context of the limited kind of openness that these education spaces provide, a fresh perspective has been given by Revathi in her latest autobiography. She confirms that when she refuses to toe the line prescribed by the mainstream, she has been deliberately kept out of seminars and at times even her remuneration as an invited speaker is not given. She states: "They ask us why we can't do other work. But who will give us jobs? For instance, I don't get a

consultation fee in universities where I'm invited to speak" (2016: xii). And this is the condition of Revathi whose autobiography, *The Truth about Me*, according to her, has been stocked in libraries of more than 300 colleges and universities in the country and is a part of the prescribed syllabus in twenty universities and colleges.

Another important aspect is the appointment of transgender teachers and other staff members in educational spaces in order to reorient these spheres. One such example is the appointment of Manobi Bandyopadhyay as the principal of Krishnanagar Women's College in Nadia district in West Bengal. Instances like this make it easier for other transgender persons in educational institutions to come out. Undoubtedly there is a progressive environment in educational spheres on account of their relative autonomy (as these places are outside the domestic spaces). But there is also a greater reluctance in 'coming out' at these places specially in teachers because they are seen as role models. Manobi's courageous assertion of her gender deviancy in this regard is exemplary. Therefore, the inclusion of transgender teachers and students is absolutely critical.

Specific *Reet* and Rituals of the *Hijra* Community:
As Seen Through the Ethnographic Windows
Opened By *Hijra* Autobiographies

A specific aspect of these autobiographies that distinguishes them from *hijra* fictional writings is that they open a unique world of *hijra* culture to the readers through the detailed descriptions of *hijras'* *reets*, rituals and customs. At times these rituals obliquely critique the hegemonic structure of our society whereas at other times they are a parody of it. One of the very interesting interventions made by *hijra* culture is the unique formation of an alternative family structure. Since reproduction is not possible, by and large, due to their gender ambiguity, the normative family structure is not a part of their world. However, they have an interesting alternative family structure where they have (a) *Badudaadi* – great-grandmother's guru (b) *Daadaguru* – grandmother's guru (great grandmother) (c) *Nanaguru* – guru's guru(grandmother) (d) *Guru* – mother (e) *Kaalguru* – guru's sister (f) *Gurubai* – (my) sister (g) *Badagurubai* – elder sister (h) *Chotagurubai* – younger sister (i) *Chela* – daughter (j) *Naathi-chela* – grand-daughter (k) *Chandi-chela* – great-granddaughter (l) *Sadak-nathi* – great grand-daughter's daughter.

It is a women-only family structure. All relationships are understood in terms of female kinship. Now this is quite interesting when seen through the lens of feminism as this alternative dispensation serves as a

subversive tool to puncture male hierarchy within a normative family structure. And since family is the smallest unit of a nation, thus *hijras*, in a very unique fashion, by creating a parallel family structure, assert their citizenship claim on the nation through familial citizenship in this way. All the three *hijra* autobiographies and anthologies chart out this familial pattern in a detailed fashion and give us a peek into their world. The radical potential of this familial pattern is evident from one more fact: though a guru is considered to be a mother, at times there is a sexual and deeply emotional bond between a guru and a *chela* that finds its manifestation in their death rituals. When a guru is dead, the *chela* wears white sari and follows all the rituals that a widow would perform for her husband in a heteropatriarchal society. No doubt, this kind of contradictory multi-layering produces much-needed fractures in the stringent boundaries of the normative family structure. A detailed discussion in this regard is available in Gayatri Reddy's book, *With Respect to Sex*.

However, this guru-*chela parampara* is not bereft of domination and subordination. The *hijra* biographies under discussion succinctly chart out this aspect. If gurus provided support in many ways, there are also instances where they turned out to be exploitative and created havoc in the lives of their *chelas*. We find one such instance in Laxmi's autobiography. When Laxmi started to gain fame and money, her guru, Lataguru, became extremely jealous of her and started not only bad-mouthing her but also tried to sabotage her career. Laxmi tried hard to bring a reconciliation by bringing Lataguru close to her home and gave her a lot of money, but nothing worked. In *hijra* culture, it is very difficult to break these shackles. No one can dare to go against the wishes of a guru because within the community, there is a clear and incessant power structure. There are seven *hijra gharanas*: *Bhendibazaarwala*, *Bulakwala*, *Lalanwala*, *Lucknow-wala*, *Poonawala*, *Dilliwala* and *Hadir Ibrahimwala*. Each *gharana* is run by a chief known as *nayak*. Guru comes after *nayak* in the hierarchy. All *hijras* have to follow the rules and regulations formulated by the *nayaks* and if they fail to do so they can be fined heavily and at times also excommunicated. Twice a year there is a *panchayat* where punishments for the erring *hijras* are decided. Indeed, alternative kinship is a major re-articulation of heteropatriarchal family dispensations at one level but on the other, since it has its own convoluted and layered power structures, it is not utopian either.

Commenting on the theoretical significance of this unique *hijra* kinship, Gayatri Reddy makes some pertinent observations: "What is the significance of such a re-articulation? Does the fact that *hijra* kinship alignments potentially mirror normative familial

arrangements necessarily make these relationships merely derivative and therefore devoid of specific symbolic value? Or as Judith Butler might argue, does this very fact, and the variety and complexity of these approximations, ‘trouble’ the ideal of the normative family? By revealing the variety of kin-family relationships that obtain in the world, anthropologists and sociologists of kinship have established alternative forms and meanings of kinship (Schneider, 1968; Stack, 1974; Collier and Yanagisako, 1987; Strathern, 1988; Weston, 1991; Stacey, 1996; Franklin, 1998). Such accounts necessarily question structuralists claims regarding the foundational imperative of heterosexual desires/families, and implicitly highlight the role of such kinship alignments in producing individuated and gendered subjects.... By examining the variety of *hijra/kothi* kin framework in their specific contexts of elaboration, we can begin to generate some answers to such questions and potentially re-theorise the analysis of kinship. One such framework is that of love between (*hijra*) mothers and daughters, *pyar ke rishte* (relationships/bonds of love), or *andhrarishte*, as they sometimes refer to these relationships” (2006: 164). Patently, the inherent obligations and responsibilities of this informal contractual kinship provide an interesting model from the anthropological point of view. It punctures our culturally mediated understanding of kinship.

As far as the alternative marital compositions of *hijras* are considered, a very interesting parallel can be drawn between them and *devdasis*. It is a kinship that runs through maternal lineages and a *devdasi*'s status in society is marked by the status of her mother and her choice of a dance guru; and she also presents a very unique mode of being a wife as she is considered to be married to God. There is a strange contradictory reception of their *devdasi* status, as on the one hand they are considered auspicious on account of being married to God (also there is a certain kind of religiosity that is attached to them) but on the other, their engagement with sex and their status as temple prostitutes make them disgraced in the eyes of the general public. Illustrating this point, Gayatri brings forth an interesting comparison between *devdasis* and *hijras*. She cogitates that “the specific rituals involved in the *pottukattu* (initiation) and the *sadanku* (incorporation) ceremonies that *devdasis* undergo not only parallel Brahmin initiation and marriage ceremonies (Srinivasan, 1984, 1988; Marglin, 1985; Kersenboom-Story, 1987), but also bear some resemblance to the various stages of *hijra* authentication including the *reet* and *nirvana* ceremonies...Marglin notes that even the unmarried *devdasis* ‘along with their brothers and sister-in-law,(form) a group which has no ties with patrilineality’ (1985: 35).

Such marginalisation of marriage, ‘male issue’, and patrilineality/patriarchy, the implicit or often explicit gender subversion apparent within the *devadasi* community, and the structural patterns of ritual and social organization among *devdasis*, make them a more useful comparison group for better understanding of *hijra* social structures and meanings than affinal groups organized around procreative sexuality” (2006: 148).

This kind of overlap of kinship structure between *devdasis* and *hijras* has been documented in *Our Lives Our Words* where there is a detailed description of it. The reasons for this overlap can be attributed to temple dance and the unique structure of family operated through matrilineal lineages only. To quote from the text: “The practice came down to us from the *devdasi* practice. In those days, *devdasis* would dance and lead the procession of deities brought on a chariot in the streets. *Hijras* would be the *nattuvannars* guiding the *tal*. Sometimes they would also join the dance. Three *dasis* of three different temples adopted three *hijras* as their daughters. My mother Jayamma was adopted by the *dasi* of the Padavettu Amman Temple. Later, she adopted me. Then I adopted Chandra and Suresh. We used to have long hair. We coiled it up and wore earrings and nose studs. We wore *lungis* and *kurtas*” (2011: 59). She talked about how her mother thought that it could be confusing if *hijras* were only addressed as sisters and younger sisters, so she devised this method of adopting a daughter. She states that “we are keeping up her tradition and fulfilling her desire to live as family. My daughter would be given as a daughter-in-law to another *hijra* through the ritual of *madikattuthal*. Therefore, these two families become related by marriage” (2011: 59). Hence Gayatri and Marglin’s contentions about the kinship overlap between these two communities have been substantiated by the account of Ayah in *Our Lives Our Words* which succinctly charts out the slippages created by these unique filial bonds into the stringent heteropatriarchal mode of family ties.

An Insight into *Hijras*’ Understanding of Their Own Gender Ambiguity Through Rituals

The death rituals of *hijras* are at times indicative of their own anxiety around gender. It is believed in their culture that an eunuch gets to know about his/her death, as mentioned in the book *Life of a Eunuch* by Piyush Saxena. They stop eating and just consume water and sit in the corner of a room praying for a painless death. A dying eunuch is considered godly, saturated with divine powers, and others try to seek his/her blessings. This reflects their belief in their own

divine powers, and in one way, despite all stigmatisation, they seem to consider themselves as true children of God. After death, the body is thoroughly washed by a man known as *ghasl* (a caste position in Muslims). After the removal of all the ornaments, the *ghasl* is given ornaments of one side of the body such as one earring, one bangle, one anklet and toe ring. We find a detailed description of it in Gayatri Reddy's *With Respect to Sex*. The gift of ornaments from one side of the body symbolically represents their own understanding of their half-feminine self.

Another interesting ritual in this regard is described by Laxmi in these words: "When a *hijra* dies, an artificial penis made of cotton or wheat flour is stuck on her body before she is burnt or buried. This, in order not to forget that the *hijra* in question was born as a male" (2015: 176-177). It is quite ironical that a *hijra*'s entire life revolves around his/her efforts of becoming and presenting himself/herself as woman but in death s/he seems to acknowledge his/her male corporeality as well. In this connection, it is important to mention another ritual as described by Laxmi in *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* and that is a *reet* known as *chatla*. After the *nirvanam*, there is a *haldi-mehndi* ceremony where turmeric is applied on a *hijra*'s face (just like it is done on a woman's face in Hindu marriages when preparing her for the anticipated sexual encounters and thus it is a very strong marker of femininity). After that, a *bindi* is stuck on her forehead. The last rite of this *nirvanam* ceremony is *chatla* where a *hijra* is bathed and then dressed in green and asked to pour a jug of milk into the sea. And after that, she must show her castrated private parts to the sea, a dog and a tree. Now it clearly suggests that a *hijra* seeks an endorsement of her womanhood from all forms of nature, be it water, animal or plant and wants to assert her femininity in this way. But their death rituals are soaked in the acknowledgement of their being born as males. Hence the *reet* and rituals described in these autobiographies provide us a deep insight into *hijras*' understandings of gender ambiguity. The first-hand information provided by these autobiographies is of vital significance and in this light these *hijra* narratives of their troubled selves are a 'must read' for any one working on this subject.

Hijra autobiographies and *hijra* anthologies create new vistas for a holistic understanding of transgender identities. *Hijras*' multi-layered alternative family disposition and their mimetic appropriation of feminine behaviour (which they use as tools to reverse the patriarchal order by the unabashed explorations of their sexuality) coupled with the consumption of public spaces by them, need to be analysed at various levels, as all these have subversive potential to

critique oppressive heteropatriarchal structures. These writings by trans individuals focus on the transgenders' own unique measures of identifying themselves as transgenders and this identification can be quite ambivalent and multi-layered. In her essay, "The struggle to be ourselves, neither men nor women: *Mak nyahs* in Malaysia", Khartini Slamah talks about the aim of a self-critical emancipator transgender movement: "Over the years, our politics as transgenders has shifted considerably, We are no longer asking the law to recognize us simply as men and women – which is what the earlier generations of transsexuals fought for – rather, we want a status that goes beyond the dichotomous structures of sex and gender roles recognized within and by law. We define ourselves using a mobile logic based on self-identification rather than corporeality...there is no one version of being a *mak nyah*. Some of us feel that it is important to have breasts, others do not. Most of us want a woman's shape but some of us do not see this as important. And only half of us feel that a sex-change would improve our lives" (2005: 107). This article brings to light important issues like the unique ethnicity of *hijras*, their rituals, their specific lingo to assert their identity, their anxiety after SRS, oppression both within and outside *hijra* community, and most importantly, the lack of transgender-sensitive educational institutions (which is their ultimate weapon to fight against any kind of suppression). This essay is a small attempt to explore the position of *hijras* as potent agents to radicalise and counter the hierarchal dispositions prevalent both in the heteropatriarchal and the homosexual worlds.

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