

GENDER PERFORMANCE IN HIJRAS: PARADOXICAL IDENTITY OF INDIAN TRANSGENDERS IN THE BOOK BY A. REVATHI “THE TRUTH ABOUT ME: A HIJRA LIFE STORY”

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ABSTRACT

The sexuality of a person is often associated to gender and both these varying identities are expected to be synonymous. If one is born with a male reproductive organ, the individual is expected to talk, walk and live like a “man”, whatever the definition of a man society has predetermined. If one is born with a female reproductive organ, the individual is to meet the feminine standards set out by the social and cultural institutions. Any deviance from the male/female binary is perceived with skepticism on the one hand and scorn/contempt on the other. The need to establish identities that lay in between the man/woman spectrum is necessary to acknowledge and accept such lives. Hijras are a community that still remain a puzzle to the majority, with their sexuality and gender performances not meeting the established dichotomy of sex and gender. This paper attempts to draw out the paradoxical identity of the hijra community through A.Revathi’s autobiography *The truth About Me : A Hijra Life Story*. The paper aims to throw light on sexuality and gender identifications of hijras by analyzing how appearance and gendered performances are significant to hijras in establishing their identities.

Keywords: Hijras, gender, sex, identities, gender-performance, appearance.

INTRODUCTION

The terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are both constructs being built upon the male/female duality, thus often failing to accommodate identities that exist outside of it. Colette Chiland, in his book *Transsexualism : Illusion and Reality* categorizes sex into three:

At biological level, nature goes beyond *dimorphism*: there are not just two sexes, for some human beings fall ‘between the two sexes’ (the intersexed or hermaphrodites and pseudohermaphrodites)... At a social level, a male/female dichotomy exists in our culture: an individual belongs to one of two sexes, and there is no third social sex. At the psychological level, sex is subjective: it is the sex each individual sees himself as possessing. (2004, 8)

Gender is also not “something which people have”. It involves the production of a social identity which is viewed as an “on-going accomplishment; something that which is constantly being done” (Ekins et al. 2008, 33). Thus gender roles are not inherent. Rather they are manifestations of conformity to the social and cultural norms that define one’s identity. Transgender is an umbrella term that covers all people whose presentation of self does not get along with the traditional gender categories. Virginia Prince, one of the pioneering activists, was the first to put the lexical compound of *transgenderism* to work during the early 1970s which further grew to encompass people with variegated identities. The Transgender Studies became all the more new and expansive in the 1990s.

In the west, the trans-individuals are known under different labels. The word “trans,” referring to a “trans woman” or “trans man” is a late development under the umbrella transgender (Stryker 2013). Transvestism, a term coined by Magnus Hirschfeld, comes from the Latin for ‘cross’ and ‘dress. It includes individuals who take up clothing typically associated with the opposite sex. In some societies, it is part of religious rituals. The term is of great significance in the butch/femme subculture and among drag queens and drag kings. *Transsexualism*, on the other hand, “refers to persons wanting to live as the opposite gender from what they were born, or perhaps assigned at birth”. Hirschfeld adds, “Transsexuals can pursue hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery as a means of bringing their self- perception of sex and gender into alignment” (Pickett et al. 2009,183). Yet another term used to refer to people whose gender identity fall outside the male/female binary is ‘Genderqueer’. They, at times, might define their gender to be falling somewhere on the continuum between male and female and at others might

define it as completely different from these terms. They might also prefer to be called using pronouns such as 'zie', instead of 'he' or 'she' and 'hir' instead of 'his' or 'her' (Munoz 2011).

HIJRAS: THE 'INSTITUTIONALIZED THIRD GENDER'

In India, transgenders come under the ubiquitous term hijra, an institutionalized 'third gender' that has existed through the ages. Hijra, the Urdu word, originates from the Arabic root 'hjr' meaning 'leaving one's tribe, which later has been adopted into Hindi. Words like *hijada*, *hijara*, *hijrah*, *hijda*, *hijira* are all used synonymously. Different cultures have their own terms for a hijra: *Napunsakudu*, *Kojja*, or *Maada* in Telugu, *Thiru nangai*, *Ali*, *Aravanni*, *Aravani*, or *Aruvani* in Tamil, *Hinjida*, *Hinjda* or *Napunsaka* in Odisha. *Khusra* and *Jankha* in Punjabi, *Pavaiyaa* in Gujarati and *Brihonnola*, *Hijra*, *Hijre*, *Hijla*, *Hizre*, or *Hizra* in Bengali. *Kothi*, a word used across South India, is different from 'Hijra' in that it refers to a feminine male who takes a 'receptive' role in sexual intercourse with a man. Their public behavior, including attire and language, is feminine (Khan 1997, 444). The male partners of kothis and hijras, often married, think of themselves as heterosexuals and keep any connection with the latter a secret from the society. The hijra population is scattered across India. During the census operation in India, which is administered once in 10 years, the population data was enumerated only for two sexes i.e. male and female. Till a few years ago hijras were identified under the male category. However, according to the 2011 census, the transgender population in India is reported to be 4.88 lakhs (Hotchandani et al. 2017).

The history of hijras can be found in records that date back to almost 4000 years which attribute them with multiple roles within the sub continental cultures. According to *LGBTQ Nation*, the most followed online news source on transgenders,

In the earliest ages, people who were seen to bridge the genders were quite often thought to possess wisdom that traditionally-gendered people did not, and were venerated for this. As civilizations transformed from matrilineal and communal societies into male-driven (patriarchal) societies with rigid class divisions and emphasis on property ownership, those male-driven cultures reduced the status of women... and because they were threatened by a persistent belief that those who blurred gender lines possessed some greater insight, they set

out to crush gender-transgressive people most of all. Into the modern age, transfolk resurfaced, but it is a long climb back just to restore any sense of equality. In earliest civilizations, throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa, tribes of different types venerated what they often identified as “The Great Mother”. (Allen 2016)

Today, the religious conservatives contribute to the promotion of prejudices against genderfluid people. Many families are influenced by their subjective interpretations of religious teachings concerning sexual orientation and gender identity of hijras, which in turn fills the latter with internal conflicts and agony. Their learned religious beliefs and values disapprove of their real identities. They are constantly perplexed to the extent of questioning their own legitimacy. But there is a lot of hypocrisy involved in these teachings and practices that degrade hijras as outcasts. Often than not, the sacred texts are misinterpreted to perpetuate intolerance against them. But as one closely looks into different religions, one can find hijras being treated with respect in the past. In the Hindu sacred text Ramayana can one find the hijra’s potential to bring both good fortune and bad fortune upon people. The legend goes thus:

When Ramar went off on exile for fourteen years, his subjects, both men and women, came to see him off to the forest. They walked with him to the forest’s edge and would have accompanied him further inside, when he told them “All of you, men, women and children, go back to your houses. I’ll complete my fourteen years of exile and return to rule over you”. So, everyone left, men, women and children, but a group of people stayed back at the forest rim for fourteen years until Ramar came back. Astonished, he asked them, “who are you? Why haven’t you gone back to your homes in the city?” they replied, “Swamy! We belong neither to mankind, nor to womankind. You said then that men, women and children ought to return to the city. But you did not ask us to go. Bound by your wishes, we remained here”. Rama was moved by their sincerity that he granted them a boon. “Whatever you speak will be true. Your words will come true”. (Revathi 2010, 44)

Biblical references also affirm the elevated status of hijras in the past. In Acts 8, there is a mention of a eunuch who was a court official and the most faithful steward. He is also baptized by Philip and made one with the church.

And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and

was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. (Readers Bible English Standard Version 2016)

Nanda S (1999), in her *Neither Man nor Woman, The Hijras of India*, says, “The irregularity of the male genitalia is central to the definition of hijras” (14). The term hijra translates into ‘eunuch’ or ‘hermaphrodite’ in English, marking its difference from the western notions of the gender variant people. The distinct hijra identity is weakened when it is paralleled with western homosexual and transsexual identities. Hijras deserve a niche of their own which distinguishes them from the umbrella of ‘Transgenders’.

The hijra population in India is a closed group with a religious-cultural and rich historical background. Literature often describes hijras as “institutionalized third-gendered” individuals “eunuch-transvestites” or “men minus men” as O’Flaherty puts it (Reddy 2007, 54). They mostly have a manly appearance, wear sarees, grow their hair long and act in a feminine manner. They are easy to identify as their dressing and makeup are often louder than that of usual women and their feminine actions appear aggressive and over the top. It is through this exaggerated behavior pattern that they draw attention of the public. Hijras are often labelled as, “marginal mockeries” of the Indian man. The hijra stereotypes include loud hand clapping, hip-swaying walk and flashing the mutilated genital in public (Reddy 2007).

The ideal hijra is expected to be a ‘sanyasi’, or completely asexual. Many undergo nirvanam, the surgical act through which the penis and testes are removed. This confers upon them the power to vouchsafe fertility to the newlyweds. Those who make a living from the bestowal of blessings are referred to as Badhai Hijra. They play the dholak, sing and dance during childbirth and at weddings. People give them whatever they can afford- sari, rice, wheat, money and they in turn bless the newborn child and the newlyweds. This practice is called doli-badaai. The others who take up sex work as an occupation are called Kandra hijras. Badhai hijras who are considered to be ritual practitioners are given a higher status than those engaged in sex work. It is, however, interesting to note that the kandra hijras claim most or all of the hijras in their community start off as sex workers and when their desires alter, they become ascetic bahai hijras. Badhai hijras, on the other hand, strongly contend this argument and insist themselves to be the ‘real hijras’ (Mal et al. 2014).

If one is born a hijra and lives among other hijras, growing hair and piercing nose and ears are of utmost importance. She should also respect the elders and do all they ask her to. She is required to follow the unwritten rules of the community from line to line. There are seven hijra houses, each with its own name, to which all hijras in India belong. Every house has an elected head called naik who holds the highest position in the power structure. A naik's parivar consists of sister (*Gurubai*), younger sister (*Chotagurubai*), daughter (*Chela*), grand daughter (*Naathichela*) and so on. They do not always live together, but meet during festivals, funerals and other gatherings. The nayak is given due respect and is served by her chelas. The head, in turn, is assigned with the duty to protect her subordinates or chelas. The most eminent and respected one among the chelas is given the title after her death. The hijras have evolved a culture of their own.

One criterion of being a 'real hijra' is undergoing nirvanam or complete emasculation. The senior hijras mostly underwent circumcision according to the Muslim rules. All hijras are expected to worship a Hindu goddess, Bedhraj Mata, from whom they apparently received the power to offer fertility. Thus the term hijra carries with it a baggage of customs, practices and beliefs which are equally important in defining one's self.

GENDERED PERFORMANCES IN HIJRAS

The Hijra identity is often problematic with its manifestation in various acts and forms. Kira Hall (1995), Professor of Linguistics and Anthropology, University of Colorado argues that hijras do not occupy a position "outside the male-female binary but instead have created an existence within it, one that is constrained by rigidly entrenched cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity" (13). She adds that they perceived themselves to be 'deficiently' masculine and 'incompletely' feminine. Hijras often have clear cut ideas of gendered behaviour going with the two established genders (31).

Gendered performance in accordance with the ideals of femininity is one important aspect of hijra identity. For Judith Butler (2015), "Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (140). Hijras'

attempts to attain these ideals can be seen in acts ranging from sartorial to performative practices. These include wearing saris, doing ‘women’s work’, employing beautification methods like hormone treatments. The hijra community has clear-cut rules of gendering.

“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. Likewise, if you happen to see a man crossing your path, you’re expected to make way for him, bend your head bashfully and make sure that your chest is covered”. (Revathi 2010,47)

Desire for an ideal female physique characterizes hijras. Appearance is not always a criterion for being accepted as a hijra, but it is significant for their sense of identity. A body like that of a woman’s body, with no body hair, soft skin, thick long hair without a wig, erotic figure is the dream of every hijra. Many remove facial and body hair through painful procedures, others spend a huge sum of money on an operation that brings with it a lot of physical suffering.

Nirvanam or sex-change operation is a crucial event in the life of a hijra. Revathi and every other hijras put up with the painful procedures from the want to become a woman. “This was a major operation: the very core of my life was to be removed and who knows if I would survive it. It hurts to death, even if one were to hold the organ tight. Imagine how much more it would hurt if were to be operated. I felt great fear... what if I died... whatever happens, whether I live or die, I would do so as a woman” (Revathi 2010, 69) Abdina Aher, a hijra from Mumbai says, “Castration... was not an easy task, it was a journey of pain, I just wanted to become a beautiful butterfly (Mccarthy 2014).

Another important attribute of their identity is their clothing. A hijra could, with veracity, quote Umberto Eco in saying “I speak through my clothes” (Hebdige 1997, 100). Most hijras have a masculine appearance with deep voices. Although, Revathi could easily pass off as a woman in her appearance, her manly voice many a times betrays her. No one in her village recognizes her initially and she went about freely as a woman. But the moment she speaks her legitimacy is questioned. “Only my voice was like a man’s. I tried to hide it, and when on the bus, spoke softly to ask for a ticket. I was afraid that my voice would give me away and I would be identified as a *pottai*” (Revathi 2010, 118). This being the case, it is through their womanly attire that hijras assert their inner self (Arya 2016). When Revathi enters Namakkal for the first

time as a woman, her family receives her with much hostility. For them, her saree appears to be a mere disguise or costume, but for her it is her real self. “Costume? What’re you all accusing me of? What I’m wearing now is real, true. Everything that happened before, the clothes I wore, the life I led, the way I had to be- that was when I was in disguise, when I wore a costume. Whatever you say, whatever anyone thinks, I shall remain what I am now” says Revathi in loud and clear voice when they asks her to rid herself off the womanly costume (Revathi 2010, 114).

Growing one’s hair long is obligatory in the hijra community. The length of the hair authenticates a hijra’s womanliness. Long hair, being a feminine marker, is much coveted by hijras. As Revathi joins the hijra community she is provided with specific instruction on how a hijra ought to be. “If I wore sari without having grown my hair, I would be seen as a man wearing a saree and that meant dishonor for the entire household. I learnt too that while we felt like women, it was equally important to look like them, and that long hair was an important marker of being feminine” (ibid, 28). His family demands him to get his hair cut, but Doraisamy denies this with all his strength. When finally forced into the act by his brothers, he feels like a part of him is lost. “At the temple, when my hair was shorn off I felt more pain than I did when my brother thrashed me” (ibid, 57).

Gendering is also seen in hijra’s ventilation of desires. Revathi shares her experience of suppressing her sexual attraction to men. “I found a few of them attractive, but I hid my desire and behaved exactly as women do. I never let a man get a hold on me. I did not so much as look a man in the eye. I behaved as a woman is expected to in our society” (ibid, 228). She often felt drawn to the ‘fair and handsome’ *seth* at the shop, but she knew she could not ever display desire (ibid, 48). For a hijra, ‘Izzat’ is of utmost importance. The Farsi term ‘izzat’ can be translated as ‘honor’ or ‘respect’ and it is often associated with female sexuality (Reddy 2007). It is the currency through which they establish their identities and bargain their relative status. “Everywhere honor is closely associated with sex” (Peristiany 1965, 35); especially in Southeast Asia, it is connected with a woman’s self control. Hijras associate respectability with controlled sexual behavior. “Since this Hindi country respects us so much, we must behave in a manner that is worthy of that respect. We must not desire men, and seek to misbehave with them. Those who think we are divine and give us money to earn our blessings should not ever think we have gone bad” (Revathi 2010, 45). The burning desires in them are kept intact in their attempt to reach up to the ideal.

Gender is not stable. It is a highly tenuous construct. According to Simone De Beauvoir, “One is not born, but, rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 2015, 310). A hijra constructs her gender based on the laid down rules of female gender performance. The age- old Indian concept of a ‘Pativrata’ has existed through centuries and remains as a guide to every Indian wife. Being submissive to the husband is what is expected of a good wife. For a hijra, wifehood is not a mere status, it is a source of pride and self esteem. According to Judith Butler (2015) , gender is, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (44). Hijras are careful in following all the stereotypes associated with a woman’s role as a wife. Mostly in spite of their aggressive nature, they come out as docile partners. They are ever enduring, sacrificing, self-effacing wives. “I did all that a woman normally does for her husband. I cooked our meals and made sure he ate on time. I cleaned the house, took care of the clothes, and all other chores. I was his mother, companion, office assistant, lover and a good wife” (Revathi 2010, 274).

Gender performances of hijras are paradoxical. Two types of performances are seen in them. At one level it looks like they adhere to the norms and on the other, they seemingly subvert them. The unique hijra hand clap belongs to the second category. “I went to observe how the others ask for money so that I could learn to do it as well as them. Sometimes, shop owners would request as not to clap our hands and gather in a group, and ask for one of us to come in and get the money” (ibid, 50). Hand claps in groups are done to gain recognition and safety in the public space. Hijras are well aware of their marginality as neither man nor woman, but instead of yielding to the side-lining, they announce their existence loud and clear through the disturbing hand clap.

Another act often associated with the hijra community is the flashing of genitals in public. This too is a strategy of protest against the discrimination society inflicts upon them. It is also a way of threatening the public that is often hostile to them. Serena Nanda (1999), a cultural anthropologist and professor emeritus at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York comments, hijras “know that their shamelessness makes people – not all but surely most- reluctant to provoke them in a public confrontation” (51). It is also used by the hijras to advantage in meeting their needs and demands. Munira, a hijra from Hyderabad says, “If people give us respect, then we are also respectful. But if they do not show us respect, then we also abuse them verbally and lift our saris. Then they bow their heads in shame and give us respect” (Reddy 2007, 139).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, hijras occupy a position beyond the hegemonic gender dyad that refuse to accommodate them. On the one hand, they attempt to assert the femininity society refuses to accord them through overt and covert manifestations. These include sex change through what is referred to as nirvanam, altering physique to meet the feminine ideal, wearing woman's clothing and growing out hair. On the other, they engage in acts that subvert the inveterate gender performances through their loud hand claps and flashing of genitals in public. The different ways in which hijras configure their sexuality and identity appear hard to comprehend with their existence outside the two established genders. They are characterized by an amalgamation of contrasting feelings, thoughts and desires culminating into a rainbow, the one which represent their community.



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