

Tribhuvan University

Deconstructing Heterosexual Normativity in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's

*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*

A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English, T.U. in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English

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November 2019

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Letter of Recommendation

Bhagirathi Chand has completed her thesis entitled “Deconstructing Heterosexual Normativity in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* under my supervision. She carried out her research from June to November 2019. I hereby recommend her thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This Thesis entitled “Deconstructing Heterosexual Normativity in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*” Submitted to Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Bhagirathi Chand has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee:

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## Acknowledgements

This study entitled “Deconstructing Heterosexual normativity in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* has been conducted for the partial requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in English of Tribhuvan University. I appreciate the support and guidance of all those people who have been making this study succeed.

My foremost appreciation and thanks go to my honorable Supervisor, Lecturer Khem Raj Khanal, for his close supervision, professional advice and encouragement during the research work. I am highly indebted and very thankful for his continuous support and constructive suggestions that have enabled this research project to achieve its present form. Moreover, I am also indebted and thankful to him for his motivation, support and instruction in completing my M.A. degree.

Likewise, special gratitude goes to Prof. Dr. Anirudra Thapa, Head of Central Development of English, for his timely and continuous guidance throughout the study. Also, I am grateful to Lecturer Laxman Bhatta for his precious suggestions and recommendations to complete this research work. I am also grateful to all my teachers for their support in one way or another way who inspired me to complete this thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, all my family members and friends for their support, care and attention that has been the driving force for any success I have had so far. Moreover, lots of thanks goes to my dear friend Kusum Dhimi and Rajendra Bam who helped me to get access to my primary textbooks without it I would not have making the thesis a reality.

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November, 2019

## Deconstructing Heterosexual Normativity in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's

### *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*

#### Abstract

*As women's life writings made it possible to gain acceptance in the larger domain, transgender life writings started to move up the ladder of recognition in the last few years. Women enjoy a fluid self but a transgender enjoys 'double fluidity' by transgressing the heteronormative body which is reflected in their narrative. In the struggles of the hijra community to establish hijras' own identity as well as day to day conflicts, renowned hijra activist LaxminarayanTripathi's contributions have been immense. This thesis will be based on the theoretical framework of Butler's "Gender Performativity". The gender perspective is related to the idea of gender identity in the society. Gender is not a natural and predetermined category, but it is the result of what roles men and women perform. Analyzing Tripathi's autobiography Me Hijra, Me Laxmi through Butler's ideas, this research concludes that Laxmi questions and attempts to subvert the traditional notion of gender roles. Trans narratives develop a dual consciousness, they are not a mirror of the cultural norms thus they have a dual consciousness – self as culturally defined and self as different from the cultural definitions. Moreover, this thesis also focuses on Laxmi's contribution in the upliftment of LGBT community and her efforts in securing a respectable status for them. Finally, this thesis tries to look at them from a humanistic point of view.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Gender, Sex, Transgender, Hijra, Performativity, Heterosexual

Far longer than the blacks or rather any subaltern community, the LGBT voice has been consciously and strategically suppressed for over a millennium. Basically, this research deals with the struggles of the transgenders' identity, freedom and for basic fundamental rights. The third gender identities are rendered invisible and pushed

to a marginal existence. The term “Transgender” is defined in the text *A Life in Trans Activism* as:

Transgender is an umbrella term that includes a range of people with diverse gender identities and experience. It includes kothis or pre-operated trans people at the feminine end of the spectrum, post-operative transgender women, and non-operated transgender people (both of whom identify with the gender that is diametrically the opposite of their biological sex), and other gender non-conforming individuals. A male to female transgender person is referred to as a trans woman, and a female to male transgender as a trans man.

(Revathi, xxviii)

Over the last seventy-five years transgender's have used the medium of literature, especially life writing as a genre not only to speak about their deeper self but also to clarify and educate others about their lives. This is a great effort taken on their behalf to gain greater acceptance in society. The word “Hirja” for Laxmi is much more dignified term. Laxmi explains the origins of the word to us- “The word Hijra is derived from ‘Hijr,’ which means a journey to find one’s true self and I went through this whole process of self –discovery to self -recognition and fighting for my gender identity” (30). Therefore, Laxmi prefers “Hijra” over “Trans” and there is a reason for it. Laxmi claims:

The word ‘trans’ is inadequate in every sense and especially in the Indian context. Here the Kinnars and Hijras have been part of our history and ancient text like ‘Ramayana’ ‘Mahabharata’, and others. The Hijra or the Kinnar community follow the ‘Guru-Chela’ Parampara and have certain rules, rituals and customs. And none of this can be described by the western equivalent ‘trans’. (31)

In this light, this research wants to claim Laxmi's autobiographical work as an alternative history parallel to the mainstream history of Indian nation by documenting the ignored and unwritten lines of the transgender stories, their experiences, rituals and values. The transgender do not have lamentation upon their own culture and rituals. They feel proud themselves being belonging to Hijra community. On the other hand, it claims that documenting issues of silent group of transgender is another form of resistance against mainstream suppression and exploitation in the heteronormative society. Therefore, Laxmi, through her lived realities is writing alternative history of Indian transgender at the same time she is passionately encouraging marginalized people of her community to come against their oppression and exploitation. Here, in this thesis I choose to use 'She' for Laxmi in the sense that throughout her autobiography she says that she enjoys womanhood and she is comfortable in her skin all the time.

It is believed that the gender and identity is based on the performance of the people. It is our conventional society that creates the boundary of dominant and marginalized group. Because of the dominancy of heterosexual normativity, the transgender are suppressed and exploited. Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of man and woman that are created in families, societies and cultures. It is determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to women and men in the society. Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, writes:

Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free- floating attributes . . . the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. . . . Gender proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this

sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (33)

Butler calls gender 'a performative gesture'(Butler 250 and echoes Simon de Beauvoir who puts it: "One is not born a woman but becomes one." (debeauvoir 267) The formulation of both emphasizes the social construction of gender.

Likewise, gender performativity is related to the idea of gender identity in society, whereby certain codes of behavior are according to gender. Which is learnt both consciously and ingrained unconsciously on the psyche of the individual, who is aware that they are performing a gender role but accept the gender identity assigned to them by their own behavior or performance. This autobiography exemplifies the journey of a transgender who underwent innumerable sufferings but ultimately decided to live life with her head high. However, in this autobiographical text, Laxmi constructs her own identity as third sex and leads the movement of voice to voiceless and space for dislocated community. Her struggles construct the separate identified group in the society where one's identity is not obtained by sex but by one's act of socialization and attributes. By documenting oral narratives as of cultural artifacts, Laxmi has created transgendered identity by means of consistent revolt against mainstream hegemony.

Going through Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, readers come across various questions and gaps. During the reading of this text, the questions can be raised as do the characters follow the conventional pattern of gender role? Or do they challenge such stereotypes and establish a new way of dealing with gender performance? Here, Laxmi's narrative begins with the questioning of the normative gender identity. "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act . . . a doing rather than a being" (Butler 13). Born as a male in a Brahmin family, Laxmi realized



that her mannerisms and behavior were feminine but she could never understand the reason behind it. She was effeminate in mannerisms and dressing which was not acceptable by her family, friends, or the society. She wanted to live every single day of her life as a woman. She faced tremendous problems at each step of her life. Yet she never left fighting. She stood up for herself, for her family and proved to the society that no matter how different the society thinks she is, she is just another human being.

Thus, Laxmi's childhood, under the pressure of conformation to such 'gender-appropriate' behavior, was not a usual one. Being sexually exploited at the tender age of seven, Laxmi stood up for herself when she realized that she is being forced and blackmailed. She states; "I decided to be rowdy and aggressive as they were. I dare them to touch me. It worked" (8). She protested against sexual advances at the age of fourteen and since then there was no turning back for her. It is a narrative that attempts to dismantle and challenge the stereotypes that aids in providing legitimacy to the normative discourse of gender identity.

Soon she realized that her sexual orientation is different and this always baffled and confused her. She was teased by boys she still felt attracted to them in general. She was confused that as she was a male by birth she was supposed to be attracted to girls. Did her attraction to boys make her a homosexual? But the gay community did not enchant her. She saw herself different from gays. Her desire for men made her question herself; "Why am I not like everyone else? Am I abnormal?" (11). As a child Laxmi thought that there might be something wrong with her own self. Then to make her got clarify her doubts, Ashok RaoKavi, gay activist smiled and said, "No, my child, you are not abnormal. You are absolutely normal. What is abnormal is the world around us. They simply don't understand us" (11).

As the eldest son of the family, Laxmi was expected to fulfill the role of the man of the house. The family expected her to be manly. Only she knew that she could not fulfill their expectations. Inwardly she felt like a woman. She wondered even if her parents accepted her would the society overlook her aberrations. She writes; “I felt inadequate. I wanted to be addressed as a woman, not a man. I was in turmoil” (37). Unable to fit into the gender roles created by the culture, one often begins to question oneself. She felt suffocated to live her life as a man. Much later in her life she realized the fact that she was a hijra. It was only after she joined the hijra community that she felt liberated. For her it was being a hijra that formed her identity. She writes; “When I become a hijra, a great burden was lifted of my head. I felt relaxed. I was now neither a man nor a woman. I was hijra. I had my own identity. No longer did I feel like an alien” (43).

Her femininity always craved for a true companion, the love that would accept her as a human, as a hijra. Her immense patience, strength and thirst to prove her worth as a hijra made it possible for her to remove hijra taboo fiasco from the society. Laxmi is proud of her sexuality and claims to be “a woman who can put all other woman to shame” (12). This book discards the idea that heterosexual relationship is the absolute and universal and provides other possibilities. Moreover, socially queer odd, deviant and restricted behaviours like transgender or dysfunctional and perverse activities are highlighted bringing them into mainstream. However, through this narrative, Laxminarayan gives voice to the marginalized and the silenced. It is in a way writing to refuse any further marginalization and also re-writing of the marginal discourse as the discourse of inclusiveness.

Laxmi attempts to dismantle and challenge the stereotypical notions about transgender and helps the reader to look at them as an ordinary person. In this

narrative, she writes about the experiences of constant harassment, the looks of disapproval, the fear of being in public spaces, the fear of not returning home alive and many more. But now, this marginalized group is overcoming its fears and has started to speak up to the world, refusing to accept the invisibility imposed on its existence. They are asserting that being transgender is an identity, not a disorder. Hence, Vidya states her outrage feelings in her autobiography *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* that “What sin have tirunangais committed? If to be born male and feel female is a sin, it is nature’s creation. What can we do about it?” (82). So, it’s not fair to treat them as extra-ordinary or inhumane. They are also part of the world. By publicly assuming their gender identity, they are challenging the heteronormative discourses that have imprisoned them for ages for being the deviant. They are inscribing themselves in world history, showing how they apprehend everything that exists within the norms and beyond them.

The writer Serena Nanda in *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* claims that “The psychological and behavioral aspects of gender are a product of socialization rather than of biology” (128). Gender identity refers to the inner psychological conviction of an individual that he or she is either a man or a woman. Further, Laxmi interrogates the ways in which mainstream society allows only those bodies to be comfortable which have been legitimized through narratives and in the process of naturalized. It is through her writing and activism that disrupts the normative boundaries and creates a center even in the peripheral space bridging the gap between the Centre and Periphery.

An activist Laxmi and other writers carve out the entire existence of a person who undergoes physical and mental transformation. Their experiences enables her to resist social discrimination. Transgender believes that they are neither men, nor

women, and are characterized as such either by themselves or by the society. Often they go through emotion, physical, sexual and mental abuse. They have to face discrimination even in the healthcare settings. They are often misunderstood as the creator of menace and nuisance. They are often considered to be aggressive. When a hijra begs, men are forced to part with their money which is given to get away from the sight of the hijras and not as a token of sympathy. Laxmi writes; “The aggressive body language of hijras scares people off, but it is something we have cultivated as a survival tactic. People often throw a few rupees our way, not because they are charitable, but only to get rid of us” (178). In the consciousness of the mainstream society, hijras are outsiders, they are accused of abducting children and castrating them. But, “The hijras, perhaps the most vocal manifestation of queerness in India, refuses to stay invisible. Ignored by the mainstream, often rejected by her own family, reduced to a joke in popular environment, she claps in the crowded streets demanding to be seen” (Pattanaik 31).

According to liberal feminist theory, sex has been defined as the biological differentiation of male/female bodies. Gender has been noted as “the manifestation of socially inscribed meaning on those sexed bodies” (Butler 34). However, that presumes a pre-discursive body with “particular physical configurations, constituted as sex, upon which a socially negotiator of culture, while sex remains a passive, indeterminate entity of nature” (23). This suggests and constitutes gender as metaphorically “a male agent acting and controlling a female landscape” (Butler 23).

The book re-defined the meaning of ‘hijra’ and changes our perspective in viewing them. The term hijra is a social construct and not a biological fact. According to LaxmiTripathi, “the word ‘hijra’ derives from the Urdu word ‘hijar’. A hijar is a person who has walked out of his tribe or community. Thus, a hijra is someone who

has left the mainstream society, comprising men and women, and joined a community of hijras” (171). In addition to it, Laxmi also stated: “The word ‘hij’ refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides called ‘hijra’” (39). Further she state; “A Hijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth but not a man either. A hijra’s body is a trap- not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man” (40).

Hijras are stigmatized figure in the public imagination. The medium of literature and cinema have continually stereotyped hijras to the cynical view of them. It is very rare when a hijra is portrayed with sensitivity. We have only seen hijras beg on the streets, hardly do we know of any facet of their life. The dominant discourses refuses to see the ‘ugly’ truth and turns a blind eye to it. Hijras are stereotyped as filthy and de-stable creatures. Mere looking at them makes one feel disgusted and contemptuous. Most people avert their gaze as soon as they spot a hijra. Hence, ManobiBandyopadhyay, the first transgender principle in India notes;

How many times you stopped at traffic signal and turned your face away from the hijra who stood outside your car window asking for money? Wasn’t it pure loathing that you felt? [. . . ] Why? I’ll tell you why. You abhorred the eunuch because you couldn’t identify with her sex. You thought of her as a strange, detestable creature, perhaps a criminal and definitely a subhuman. (viii)

The stereotypical views of hijras perpetrate their further marginalization.

When Butler in her book *Bodies that Matter* argues for discursively produced construct of sex as well as gender, she is not arguing that “bodies are imbued with distinguishing characteristics, genitalia, or even specific chromosomal matter. She is not even saying that sexed bodies are not real and actual” (87). Rather, like Foucault,

she emphasizes “the social meanings ascribed to real objects, as dependent on discursive systems of power/ knowledge- not that they do not exist” (87). With this insight, further analysis is done.

The hijras, as a gender identity, is related to a community and it is the oldest ethnic-transgender community in India. The community is complex social structure called jamaat. Devoid of traditional kinship ties, the hijras living in a jamaat develop alternative forms of relationships based on the common experience of a life outside the socially prescribed norms and models. They provide comfort, support and a sense of belonging to one another in the social group. A. Revathi describes the community as, “similar to an extended family and, like a household, is headed by an elder known as the guru who in turns adopts a set of Chelas or disciples who are like daughters to her, the jamaat becomes their life and security” (238).

The hijra community has its own culture, its own religious beliefs, its own rituals and its own language (secret/coded language). Organized matrilineally, its strength lies in the kinship relationship of the guru-chela system, which is based on social and economic obligations between the master (guru) and the disciple (chela/hijra). The community functions as a shelter for trans-women excluded from the “cistem” and also a space for subversion of those gender norms imposed by a heteronormative discourse. To better understand this, it is best to think and analyze the term in the plural- “communities” of hijras, taking into account the regional, linguistic, cultural, religious, economic and caste differences in the Indian subcontinent. Laxmi has been spending all her time with the hijras. She has learnt enough about them and she claims that “I was proud to be a part of the community” (51).

A person is not born hijra but becomes so through a ritual known as reet, which is a difficult and complicated rite of passage. The reet marks, as Gayatri Reddy highlights, “the authenticity and commitment to hijra identity” (154). In this ritual, the initiated chooses a guru and the guru gives money to this chela, thus establishing a social and economic contract between the two. The chela receives a sari, a dupatta, and training on how to clap, how to beg and how to flatter people with their talk and gestures. As part of a group, a hijra uses this training to earn a living. Also, there are three main forms for hijras to make a living: badhaai (giving blessings on auspicious occasions) and mangti (begging and threatening with curses when refused) or to involved in dhandha (sex work), as society does not offer them jobs and other opportunities. Because of lack of education (they are forced to quit school because of gender violence) and job opportunities (most doors are shut to them) many hijras are forced, as Laxmi affirms, “to find refuge in the hijra world” (8).

However, Laxmi is the first transgender to represent Asia Pacific in UN in 2008 and who has been working for the rights of the third gender or the transgender for over two decades. Laxmi has been representing issues like gender change and the transgender problems, HIV AIDS related issues in transgender in several conferences of national and international stature. She pioneered the Indian Third Gender Movement and was the leader to take up the case to the Supreme Court of India for establishing a gender other than that of Male and Female i.e, the third gender-‘others’. At present she is one of the leading voices of the hijra community and one who is breaking the stereotypes within the community itself to empower this marginalized sect within the society to give them equal rights as human. Her interest in activism led her to the establishment of the organization ‘Astitava’ in 2007 which works for the welfare of the sexual minorities.

This research will derive the idea developed by theorist Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, where she asserts "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). Hence, gender is not the result of nature but it is socially constructed. Gender is a social performance. It means, a person's gender is not simply what sexual organ he/ she gets at birth, but more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and again does recurrently, in interaction with others or how he/ she behaves outside his/her appearances. It is related to performance, practice and social recognition.

Furthermore, Butler states that "[w]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is constituting the identity it is purported to be" (25). Gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a "masculine" man or a "feminine" woman. Gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language. If you like, it is not that an identity "does" discourse or language, but the other way around- language and discourse "do" gender. There is no "I" outside language since identity is a signifying practice, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects rather than the cause of discourses that conceal their working (145). It is in this sense that gender identity is performative.

"There is no original or primary gender a drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler 180). Butler's essay now moves towards using the example of drag performance in which the limits of gender are challenged, reconsidered, even redefined, in drag, she draws a distinction between one's body and one's soul. One may wonder whether this distinction differs from her image of inner and outer worlds earlier. She explains, "the soul is not imprisoned by



or within the body but “the soul is the prison of the body”, quoting Foucault (184). Furthermore, Butler ends her essay as follows: “Gender can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent. As credible bearers of these attributes, however, gender can be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible” (193).

In addition to it, Nanda claims that, “The present transgender community includes a continuum of people, from those who wish to undergo sex-reassignment surgery, to those who wish to live their lives androgynously” (139) However, she further presents her view that “the hijras are an institutionalized third gender role that has its roots in ancient India, and that has been strengthened by the historical role of eunuchs in the Mughal courts” (144). However, the heteronormative society refuses to accept the existence of such fluid identities by labelling them as supernatural. Hindu mythology is plenteous with images where men transform into women and vice versa. Hijras related themselves with Lord Shiva in his form as ardhnanarishwara (half male and half female), Lord Krishna as Mohini, Arjun as Brihannalla, and Shikhandi who was reborn as man. Even during the Mughal Empire, eunuchs held prominent positions in the royal courts. They were trusted with the guarding of harem and were also employed as the political advisors and powerful administrators.

Therefore, one must write, as Helene Cixous suggests- every different gender must write- to free themselves from the shackles of heteronormativity, of the gender police and of a compulsory heterosexuality by trying to define and by disrupting the limits of gender to lead to an empowerment of both the self’s inner and outer worlds. (348) It was only after a long continuous struggle that On April 15, 2014, in a landmark judgment, India’s Supreme Court recognized transgender people as a third gender. Delivering the verdict, Justice K.S. PanickerRadhakrishnan asserted that “recognition of transgender as a third gender is not a social or medical issue but a

human right issue” (Radhakrishnan, 25). However, we know that a law does not mean that the rights of transgender people will be respected. Also a law does not guarantee that the mentality of people will be transformed overnight. After two years of passing The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014 by parliament, Indian trans people are still fighting for their rights, and the Central and State governments have still not implemented some of the core directions given in the judgement, as pointed out by Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli in an article in *The Wire*:

Access to education and consequently to employment continue to evade the transgender community. Transgender continue to face the violation of their rights to life, facing unreported and unregistered hate crimes. There is very poor access to health and medical care, and many trans-people continue to be pathologised as having 'gender identity disorder' due to inaction by the Medical Council of India. (Mogli 2016)

However, even today hijras stand at the threshold of the society. Laxmi notes; “despite getting recognition by the SC in 2014, we still do not have rights” (128).

To make it more complicated, transsexual activists, academics and lawyers have questioned the definition of the term transgender in the “Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2016”. The bill defines (i) “transgender person” as someone who is:

(A) neither wholly female nor wholly male; or (B) a combination of female or male or (C) neither female nor male; and whose sense of gender does not match with the gender assigned to that person at the time of birth, and includes trans-men and trans-women, persons with intersex variations and gender-queers. (Transgender Persons Bill 2016)

Sangama, an NGO for Sexual Minorities, and Reach Law filed a case for an amendment to be made in the definition, claiming that “Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2016” completely distorts the historical legislation for transgender in India. For them, this definition is improper and derogatory, violating human rights, as it inhibits people from expressing their gender identity. In *A Life in Trans Activism*, A. Revathi argues that

Apart from me, several of my transgender community people (that also includes trans men), have considerable reservations and confusion about the implications of the judgment. The most important question that comes out to our minds is this: what is meant by the term transgender? What is meant by the term third gender? Who is included? Who is left out? (Revathi230)

According to the officials, a revised bill that is back in parliament, will drop “neither wholly female nor wholly male” from the definition. The certificate of identity as a transgender person will be issued by the district magistrate indicating a change in gender on receipt of application after being satisfied, suggesting that medical screening would not be required. The transgender person will have the option to choose man, woman or transgender independently of surgery or hormone therapy. What seems progressive in this revised bill is the comprehensive insurance scheme that will cover sex reassignment surgery, hormonal therapy and laser therapy. It is unclear if the revised bill will address the issue of reservation for transgender. For the activists, the bill should define discrimination and punishment for sexual violence against trans people.

Michel Foucault understanding of silences as an integral part of the communicative process can be utilized as a tool in this research. Foucault stresses the

necessity of an astute awareness of the power structures intrinsic to the workings of language:

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying things, there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. The silence can convey many things. Silence can contain repressed rebellious sense. Or it can contain weapon against the rhetoric of fruitless engagement in debate. (60)

Truth is the property of silence. The silence fill the space between words. However, over the years hijras have been always looked down as a menace in society. They are usually out casted by their families and also society. But Laxmi's autobiography defies and breaks many such myths and stereotypes governing the perception of the layman.

Laxmi's acceptance by her family breaks the prevailing norm and sets an example for those families where such children are born. The positive change in the attitude of the family is reflected when Laxmi reminisces on a television show "SachKa Samna" in which she had participated and was accompanied by her family and the family acceptance on her queerness was pretty clearly evident. Supporting Laxmi's choice, her father states: "why should I expel Laxmi from the family? I am his father, he is my responsibility. A Hijra can be born to any family. If we spurn them and show them the door, we leave them with no alternative but to become beggars, driving Laxmi out of the house was out of question" (123). The intention of the author is not to "seek sympathy from the society or government", but rather to make this heteronormative society aware of the fact that the third sex are also human- these people also have feelings, they too want to be loved and accepted, they too want

to live freely with dignity and privacy. So far, this autobiography is an attempt on her part to bridge the gap between the transgender and the society; so that transgenders are no longer perceived in a negative light or as separated from men and women.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* raises some essential questions;

To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, [ . . . ]? To what extent is “identity” a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? (16-17)

She maintains that the identity of a person does not constitute the experience of personhood rather it is socially constructed. The socio-discursive production of the norms sets the ideal. The failure to identify with the ideal can result in confusion. The failed subject becomes a subject of ridicule.

Historically, it is seen that hijras are respected in Uttar Pradesh. They are called upon to bless newborn children and newly married couples. People believe that the blessings of a hijra come true. And the belief originates in no less a source than the Ramayana itself. It is said that when Lord Rama began his fourteen-year exile in the forests, the people of Ayodhya accompanied him to the outskirts of the town to bid him farewell. Here, Lord Rama turned to his subjects and said to them,

‘Oh, all you men and women who love me, please return to your homes. I will complete my exile and be back among you.’ Among his subjects were hijras too. They were neither men nor women. They couldn’t go back to their homes, for he had implored only the men and women to return home. The hijras thus stayed put at the outskirts of the town for fourteen years until he returned.

Lord Rama was moved by the penance of the hijras. He granted them a boon: their blessings and their curses would come true. (49)

When Laxmi was invited in international conference that was holding abroad- the Sixteen World AIDS Conference, Toronto, Canada, in August 2006, at that time she did not have her passport. When she went to passport office, those officers asked her to show her identity marker whether she was a transgender or not. The statement “But what is the proof that you are a hijra? We would need a registered medical practitioner to certify that you have had surgery that has converted you from a man to a woman” (80). Though she had no such surgery done, and no evidence behind her being a hijra, she had to go for medical test and running from pillar to post, finally certified herself as *Hijra* and got passport.

In Toronto, she gave her speech which was followed by loud applause. One of the people who congratulated to Laxmi was Dennis Brown, the UN AIDS chief who said to Laxmi that “I am proud of you” (87). Later, she went to Church Street which was Gay district of Toronto city. Laxmi met there many trans-men and trans-women who faced absolutely no discrimination at all and she discovered their lifestyle was poles apart from lifestyle in India where they are even deprived from fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution.

Laxmi was the author of her own life- a rarity for a hijra. She did not let anyone else rule her life. “I did not have sex in exchange of money. I have always considered myself to be monarch of own body” (35). Even today people are amazed with the sight of a self-empowered hijra. She became the first hijra to be invited to a roundtable conference in Mumbai on the status of HIV and AIDS in India. She writes; “I felt empowered, and empowerment is not a word that normally exists in the vocabulary of a hijra” (62-63). In her life, she also took part in one of the popular

reality TV show called Bigg Boss. She wanted to use the show as a platform to make viewers aware that “hijras are normal people, just like them. We’re not extraterrestrial. We have emotions, just like ordinary human beings, and are perhaps more sensitive than them” (125). Similarly, Laxmi wanted to change the mind-set of the people who consider hijras to be ugly. She thought of organizing a beauty pageant for the hijra community in order to boost the confidence of hijras and to carry themselves about with an air of dignity. She called it Indian Super Queen Contest. She thought to herself that if there could be Miss India and Miss Universe contest for women, such contests could be organized for hijras too. She writes; “hijras are called born - clappers, but for a change, we would get the world clap for us” (131). The event was a success and Laxmi was highly praised for her work.

In “International Journal of Research (IJR)” JahanIshrat states that, “Through Laxmi’s autobiography, we get the realistic picture of hijra’s life, who hijras are and what are the processes to shape their personalities as hijras? Her autobiography helps to dispel myths about the hijras and also throw away our prejudices. Hijras are also ordinary people, just like us” (210). At times, people have made so many myths about hijras. They have misunderstand about hijras who receive orders from their community to kidnap a child and convert people to become a hijra which is a total myth. Besides this, another myth about them is that “the funeral of a hijra is performed late in the night and she is beaten with slippers” (158). Here, Laxmi states:

Hijras belong to different religions, and our last rites depend on our religion. A hijra who is Hindu is cremated, while a Muslim hijra is buried. When carrying the corpse of a dead hijra to the graveyard, we shed our women’s clothing and dress instead in shirt and pant, or in kurta and pajama. We do this to hide the fact that deceased is a hijra. (158)

These sorts of myth only changes when people become aware and get friendly with hijras.

The narrator Laxmi herself proudly asserts that “Luckily, for me, I was both a dancer and an activist. So, while activism enabled me to live in the ghetto, my dancing ensured that I was also a part of mainstream society (118). Laxmi’s dominant identity was of a hijra and she wanted to live with hijras but at the same time she wanted to be a part of the mainstream society too. It was her dancing and activism that enabled her to a part of both the society. Her activism brought her to the hijra household and her dancing and artistic inclinations kept her in touch with the mainstream society. Along with recognizing the role of third gender is societal reformation, Laxmi captures the rituals, practices, experiences of them. Being brought up in a Brahmin family, she got good education. The support of her family gave her a positive inner inspiration to resist the violence and to stand for her rights. As the result, she became an activist of International repute who works for the community through her campaign group Astitva and is the first transgender to represent Asia-pacific at the UN in 2008.

Laxmi’s voice on the International platforms, talking about her own self, she said, “I was just as normal as any other boy or girl. Society made me feel different.” She opined that “The perception of society regarding the transgender is partial and discriminating.” She emphatically remarked that “the ideas of gender and sexuality are all in our minds. If you allow people to discriminate you, they will discriminate you totally” (Jani 18). However, Laxmi believes that if government provides the transgender employment opportunities, treated equally, then they will also achieve respect, their lives will also blossom. In 2014, the Supreme Court ruled that “It is the



right of every human being to choose their gender,” (Mehfooz 57). The judgment Statement of transgenders in general, and hijras in particular.

In addition, Laxmi also plays key role in the plea to re-examine Section 377 of Indian Penal Code. On the one hand, the reviewer Dr. DarshaJani states in his journal article that:

Due to the effects of activist like Laxmi, the Supreme Court of India agreed to reexamine the Section 377 of IPC in February, 2016. The Supreme Court’s move to order re-examination of its verdict criminalizing sexual activity between same sex consenting adults under section 377 of IPC is widely welcomed by activists today as “hope of upholding the democracy” in the country. (19-20)

Here, Laxmi’s identity of being hijra is for the people but being a social worker, her works are more than of being hijra. Laxmi consciously accepted however she is. She could be opted to operation to change her sex but she thinks “castration is a spiritual process. One has to be ready for it. It cannot be imposed” (175) but she decided to be a hijra and started to work to uplift for hijra community.

Another critic MousimMondal in his journal article entitled “Lapis Lazuli- An International Literary Journal” claims that “The third gender needs to create a ‘language of their own’ to specifically address their desires and problems and there by breaking away from this lingual colonization” (128). However, Mondal paradoxically questions to his readers “Cannot this heteronormative society allow an individual to live a life of dignity only because he/ she (?) Do not fit into the existing gender geometry? Can we not hope to draw a new figure of gender geometry? Hopefully we can” (131).

Similarly, in *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, at the end of the autobiography, Vidya tries to convey her feelings of hurt and anger to the readers. She tries to make us understand that “Transgenders are no different from men and women, and they do not deserve to be either ridiculed or marginalized. Transgenders are believed to be closer to God and that their curses may come true. This myth about transgenders makes people fearful of them” (Kardam 14). Here, Vidya attempts on her part to bridge the gap between the transgenders and the society in order to change the negative perceptions and face inclusion in the society. However, the point of departure from all these reviews is that Laxmi in her autobiography questions the binaries of gender identity system. She is subverting the accepted notions of gender identity and questions the various roles assigned to males and females respectively. Thus, the book re-defines the meaning of ‘hijra’ and changes the reader’s perspective in viewing them. So, her writing has brought new hope to battered humanity.

The writer Devdutt Pattanaik, for example, uses example of mythical character such as Shikhandi to argue that Hinduism was tolerant of, and even celebrated, the use of the modern term, “queerness”. Indian mythology contains numerous examples of androgens, impersonates of the opposite sex, and individuals who undergo sex changes, both among deities and humans. These mythical figures are well known as part of Indian popular culture, which helps explain the ability of the hijras to maintain a meaningful place for themselves within Indian society in an institutionalized third gender role. In one myth lord Vishnu “transforms himself into Mohini, the most beautiful woman in the world, in order to take back the sacred nectar from the demons who have stolen it” (Nanda 20). In another well-known myth, lord Krishna takes on the form of a female to destroy a demon called Araka. Araka’s strength came from his chasteness. He had never set eyes on a woman, so Krishna took on the form of a

beautiful woman and married him. After three days of the marriage, there was a battle and Krishna killed the demon. He then revealed himself to the other gods in his true form. Hijras, when they tell this story, say that when Krishna revealed himself he told the other gods that “there will be more like me, neither man nor woman, and whatever words come from the mouths of these people, whether good (blessings) or bad (curses), will come true” (Nanda 21).

In modern India, Hijras have lived on the fringes of society, often begging at traffic lights, living in poor areas, indulging in petty crimes to survive and, by and large, experiencing multiple forms of violence from society at large as well as from the state. They are frequently subjected to harassment by the police, whose discriminatory and inhuman acts are legitimized by law and social intolerance. AtanuSamanta, the reviewer asserts in his research article that “The tragic part of the story is that it is society who denies them entry into main stream productive economy, and it is society itself who curses them for a parasitic life” (222). In one research study Prof. AnithaChettiar claims “All hijras are human beings and logically all human rights apply to all hijras. As all human beings have the right to live with dignity at all times, regardless of their legal, social or political status so do hijras” (758).

In *A life in Trans Activism* (2016), for example, A. Revathi notes that, “we are harassed by parents, teachers, peers, and the police. The media and law only highlight our involvement in street based sex work and begging. Why don’t you highlight some of our pressing needs and concerns and the multiple violations and oppressions we experience?” (62). They face widespread discrimination and have their human rights violated on a daily basis, and for years the medical community has pathologized being transgender imposing on transgender people the so-called diagnosis of “gender

identity disorder”. At present, the medical community affirms that transgender people suffer from “dysphoria”, that is, that they are afflicted with discomfort with their bodies. For hijras the sex change operation is a way for them to become physically as much like women as possible. The physical transformation of finally getting rid of their male genitals makes them identify and feel like a woman and they believe, it truly fulfills them.

Furthermore, Laxmi mentions that a hijra’s death or murder, did not seem to matter to anyone in the heteronormative society. While working in DWS, Laxmi had to visit Kamatipura, Mumbai’s notorious red-light district. She noticed that most of the customers came from all religions and were of all ages. Some of them hid their faces so as not to be identified. Others were more upfront, probably having lost all sense of shame. “But all of them were hypocrites. They fucked prostitutes and then went back to wives and mothers and sons and daughters to be a part of the respectable society” (65). Through her narrative, the thought “to be identified” among the mainstream is the constant urge of the transgender. The conflict between the desires of the body and the societal expectations of ‘performativity’ is a common experience for the queer people.

In the aftermath of *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, R. Raj Rao argues that hijra literature cannot be read in isolation as a single production. It, according to Rao, should be read along with Indian gay and lesbian literature that has boomed in recent years with novels, short stories, poems and autobiographical accounts. There are many such voices and the list is quite long, but all come out as a counter-narrative against heterogeneous cultural hegemony in different dimensions. In addition, these voices demand the repeal of Section 377. Chapter XVI, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code dating back to 1861, introduced during the British rule of India, criminalizes sexual

activities “against the order of nature”, arguable including homosexual sexual activities. This law has been used by the police to intimidate sexual minorities and has been a source of serious violations of human rights, especially for hijras. There are numerous stories about transgender that were charged and threatened with Section 377. They are dumped in police vans and whisked off. Sometimes they are thrown into jail.

In “Disrupting the Dinner Table: Re-thinking the ‘Queer Movement’ in Contemporary India”, Ashley Tellis 2012 criticizes this campaign against the Delhi High Court Judgment on Section 377 and contents that the queer movement in India, which is articulating the protest, “is classist, casteist, sexist and complicit with power structures of the most oppressive kind” (143). Tellis claims that many marginalized groups mainly hijras were not asked to participate in the elaborations to present an agenda with their demands. He writes that this “evacuate[s] them of all agency in the interest of portraying them as human rights victims” (153). In the case of hijras, the interaction they have within and outside their community helps them form their identity and further validates it. Silence, one of the strongest forms of exclusion of the hijras, has been broken and their narratives are now fighting transphobia, as Living Smile Vidya talks about, “A type of Brahmanism with the hijra becoming the untouchable subject” (145).

The research explores the issue related to the experiences of traumatic effect caused by the society towards gender and how the transgender are able to recognize in the worldview by framing their own identity. Through this sort of events and stories, they denounce the dehumanizing living conditions of hijars, with no rights as citizen. Trans people are publishing their experiences of trans-masculinity and trans-femininity and are raising question about trans- identities. They are encouraging the

trans subject to talk about their identity conflicts, gender violence and overcoming these obstacles. These authors are taking a step further and bringing the trans subject to the center of the narrative. At present these transgender people are sure that their writing will make their story circulate as a political act.

Gender, as Judith Butler affirms, is performative. It is related to performance, practice and social recognition. Butler suggests the gender is not the result of nature but it is socially constructed. Everything is yet looked from the lens of the gender binary. Butler in her *Gender Trouble* asserts:

The institutionalization of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practice of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional movements of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender and desire. (22-23)

Since the transgender people fall beyond the binaries and heteronormativity, they are considered abnormal and unnatural. The basis for discrimination against transgender people in India lies in their sexuality. The image of a hijra is used for ridicule.

Because of discriminatory practices over time have driven the transgender to the periphery of social exclusion and made them the poorest in terms of social- political and economic development.

Another critic M. S. Kimmel from *The Gendered Society*, argues that “gender was less a component of identity- fixed, static- that we take with us into interactions, but rather the products of those interactions” (Chettiar 752). It means, a person’s gender is not simply what sexual organ he/she gets at birth, but more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and again does recurrently, in interaction with others or

how he/she behaves outside his appearances. As West and Zimmerman argue “doing gender” is an ongoing activity, done in interaction with others and is a product of social interaction. They also point out that there is an awareness that doing gender will elicit judgment from others, therefore the person doing gender is accountable for their gender performance. Hijras does not behave within the boundaries of normative gender scripts and this draws harsh judgment from others, outside the hijra community. Doing ‘hijrapan’ i.e. performing their gender, which is neither male nor female, forms an essential component of their identity.

This writing mainly focuses to get an insight into their day to day living and the challenges that they face as a result of being part of this heteronormative society. The autobiographies by transgender women, such as A. Revathi, Living Smile Vidya, and ManobiBandyopadhyay have added to our understanding of the complexities of caste, gender and sexuality. They are a compilation of the history and culture of the hijras and their opposition to the dominance of modern knowledge systems which create insidious processes of stigmatization, discrimination, marginalization, pathologization and confinement, operating system, family, state and medical system. The genre is also trying to raise public awareness about gender and sexuality and to discuss human rights, democracy and equality in Indian society. Despite the social exclusion they face, the hijras have dared to live transgressively in relation to social norms and their lives were and are marked by unique forms of resistance. No experience of gender is so strong in the sense of denaturalizing what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman than the trans experience. They deploy agency in a variety of ways by showing how their lives are located at the intersection of caste, class and patriarchies.

Laxmi believes that “change is only possible when the law changes” (161). As we know the heteronormative discourse and patriarchy are deep-rooted in any society and India is no exception. Transgender people face prejudices throughout their life. They receive little support from their families- most are essentially thrown out or run away from oppression. The ridicule for not belonging to the binary classification of gender lasts the entire lifetime. The ridicule and abuse at schools make the transgender children to give up education; harassment and violence from the police ensures they do not have protection of the law. And employment in many cases is beyond the reach for such oppressed group. Hence, transgender had undergone difficulties and challenges for getting ration card, Aadhaar card, pass port. The passport authorities were unwilling to issue these transgenders’ pass port without a medical certificate that declared them as transgender / transwoman. After many trips to those pass port authorities, request done to many government officials and help from activist organizations, the people like, Laxmi, Revathi, Vidya, Manobi and other transgenders are able to obtain their pass port in current days. Further, the Election Commission has started issuing voter ID cards, to the transgender people as transgender; there have been even elected representatives from the transgender diaspora. ShabnamMausi was the first transgender to be elected as Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), the governing body of the state in Madhya Pradesh. Kerela became the first state in the country to adopt a policy for ensuring the constitutional rights of the transgender.

In "The half-Woman God" Salman Rushdie asserts; “Yet hijras have always been, and still are, treated with a mixture of fascination, revulsion, and fear” (Rushdie 109). However, the marginalization and discrimination are still the norm; the fight for equal rights goes on. In the end, nothing could be done for the upliftment of hijras or



third gender unless the narrow mindsets of people change. The transgender community will be truly empowered if all the citizens of the nation join hands for their overall development. Families need to understand that having gender non – conforming behavior is not abnormal. Engaging the transgender people in the formulation and implementation of policies directly impacting them is necessary.

Transgender people have faced oppression over the centuries at the hand of the heteronormative society. But several milestones have been achieved by transgender people recently and is on progressive mode. Transgenders write and express their own body with a desire that they will be heard and accepted, thus they are creating a voice to communicate with the traditional heteronormative society, and there by it becomes a concept of body politics. As Butler states, Laxmi understood the reality that gender could neither be true or false, neither natural nor superficial. Yet we are forced to live in a culturally constructed perspective of gender. She was able to break the stereotypical binaries of gender and could transgress both mind and body from a male-born Raju to a female- Laxmi. Her body performed in becoming a transgender in a heterosexual society where the stereotypical binaries exist to remain as male or female only. Laxmi was a victim of harassment and abuses by the society because she did not perform the correct gender which was assigned at her birth.

Performativity is based on variety of socially constructed matters like gender and race. Amongst all this socially and culturally existing norms Laxmi's transnarrative and body fought and performed in such a manner that she created a fluid identity for her 'self'. According to Nagoshi and Brzuzy, "transgenders are those who express gender identities outside traditional heteronormative definitions" (Saveri 910). Laxmi was also successful through her text. Butler opines that,

. . . if gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes, and if that significance is codertimened through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender . . . but the more mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship t the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence. ("Performative Acts" 524)

This was the area where Laxmi proved her 'self' to be different from the gendered existence. She always knew that she was trapped in a wrong sex but never attached it with her gender. She was a female trapped in a male body. She found a body which suited her individuality by performing through her body and transnarrative. So it can be said that gender is an act which should be performed because gender is a social construct.

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