

The Creative Launcher

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Dichotomy of the Centre and Margin in LaxminarayanTripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*

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Abstract

Though the Supreme Court of India on 15th April 2014 accorded legal recognition to the third gender community in India yet even today they continue to face discrimination. The politics of gender and sexuality in contemporary India is essentially constructed on the notion of the 'normative' and the 'alternative'. In such context the alternative identities are rendered invisible and pushed to a marginal existence. However, refusing to remain in closet LaxminarayanTripathi in her autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* transgresses the boundaries of normative gender and asserts her identity as a hijra. It is a narrative that attempts to dismantle and challenge the stereotypes that aids in providing legitimacy to the normative discourse of gender identity. It interrogates the ways in which mainstream society allows only those bodies to be comfortable which have been legitimized through narratives and in the process naturalised. It is through her writing and activism that Laxmi disrupts the normative boundaries and creates a centre even in the peripheral space bridging the gap between the centre and periphery.

This proposed paper attempts to analyse the experiences of marginalisation of the third gender community due to the antipathetic attitude of the mainstream society. The paper will examine how certain bodies at the margin can become a site of resistance. It will also examine the ways 'deviant' bodies are coerced to confirm to the norm of the society and how the same bodies through resistance can create a space even in the peripheral space.

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Key Words- *Stereotype, Normative, Discourse, Marginalisation.*

There's a real simple way to look at gender. Once upon a time, someone drew a line in the sands of a culture and proclaimed with great self-importance, "On this side, you are a man; on the other side, you are a woman." It's time for the winds of change to blow that line away. (Bornstein 21)

If binary gender identity of male and female is established as the centre, then 'alternative' identities such as hijras occupy the margins. LaxminarayanTripathi's autobiographical account *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* is a narrative that gives voice to the marginalised and the silenced. It is in a way writing to refuse any further marginalisation and also a re-writing of the marginal discourse as the discourse of inclusiveness.

The *hijra* community in India is either invisible or hyper-visible. Most of us know that *hijras* exist in the society but we refuse to accept them as an essential part of the society. 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 *hijra* 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." (Tripathi 178) In the consciousness of the mainstream society, *hijras* are outsiders, to be shunned and feared for the special powers to bless and curse they are supposed to possess. They are accused of abducting children and castrating them. The dominant gaze of the society renders invisible the existence of *hijras* by simply glossing over their presence. 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 entertainment, she claps in the crowded streets demanding to be seen." (Pattanaik 31)

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Hijras are stigmatised figure in the public imagination. The medium of literature and cinema have continually stereotyped *hijras* adding 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 other facet of their life. The dominant discourse refuses to see the ‘ugly’ truth and turns a blind eye to it. *Hijras* are stereotyped as filthy and detestable creatures. Mere looking at them makes one feel disgusted and contemptuous. Most people avert their gaze as soon as they spot a *hijra*. ManobiBandyopadhyay, the first transgender principle in India notes;

How many times have 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 marginalisation.

Hindu mythology makes constant reference to the people of third-sex. *Hijras* legitimize their existence through these myths. However, the mainstream 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 women transform into men. *Hijras* relate themselves with Lord Shiva in his form as ardhnanariswara (half male and half female), Lord Krishna as Mohini, Arjuna as Brihannalla, and Shikhandi who was reborn as man. Despite the numerous references to queers in the myths, the third gender people still inhabit the invisible space. Even during the Mughal Empire, eunuchs held prominent positions in the royal courts. They were trusted with the guarding of *harem*¹ and were also employed as the political advisors and powerful administrators.

It was under the colonial rule that *hijras* were criminalised. The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 officially interweaved criminality into the lives of eunuchs. It assumed that certain

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tribes and communities were “addicted to the systematic commission of non-billable offences.” (Narain 57) Under this provision;

A eunuch was ‘deemed to include all members of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear, to be impotent.’ The local government was required to keep a register of the names and residences of all eunuchs who are reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children or of committing offences under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. (Narain 59)

Such categorisation suggested that crime was inborn and hereditary which could be passed on to the next generation just like the caste system. It also provided legitimacy to the moral subjugation and oppression of the subjects thus criminalised. The police surveillance became an everyday presence in the lives of eunuchs thus categorised. Though the act was repealed in 1949, the stigma of criminality for *hijras* still continues even today. People’s Union for Civil Liberties – Karnataka (PUCL-K) notes; “what is important about this historical background is that the contemporary perception of *hijras* as thieves as well as brutal violence which is inflicted against them can be traced back to this colonial legislation which stands to exist as part of the living culture of Indian law.” (48)

It was only after a long continuous struggle that the Supreme Court of India in its judgement in National Legal Services Authority Vs. Union of India and Other on 15th April, 2014, declared that the transgender be recognised as third gender giving them legal recognition. It also directed the central and state governments to take required measures to help the transgender people regain their respect and dignity in the society. 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.”(The Indian Express) Laxmi’s autobiography is one such narrative that attempts to give voice to the silenced voices.

LaxminarayanTripathi is a transgender rights activist, actor and dancer in Mumbai, India. In 2002, she became the chairperson of the NGO, DAI Welfare Society, which is an organisation working for *hijras*. In 2008, she became the first transgender person to represent

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the Asia Pacific in UN. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* is an autobiographical account, one of the earliest contribution to the genre of *hijra* literature. It attempts to dispel the stereotypical notions about *hijras* and helps the reader to look at them as an ordinary person. It also attempts to bring the marginal voices to the centre. Laxmi got her first break in Vaishali Samant's 'Lavani on Fire' and Thomas Wartman's 'Between the Lines'. She has also appeared on TV shows such as 'DusKa Dum', 'SachKaSaamna' and 'Big Boss'. She used all these platforms to make the viewer's sensitive towards *hijras* and to make them realize that *hijras* are normal people and not some extra-terrestrial beings.

Judith Butler 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? (Butler 16-17)

She maintains that the identity of a person does not constitute the experiences 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.

Laxmi's narrative begins with the questioning of the normative gender identity. Born as a male, Laxmi realised that her mannerisms and behaviour were feminine but she could never understand the reason behind it. She was sexually exploited at a tender age of seven and though 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 as different from gays. She wanted to live every single day of her life as a woman. Her desire for men made her question herself; "I am effeminate" ... 'and people tease me. I am also sexually attracted to men. Why am I not like everyone else? Am I

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abnormal?””(Tripathi 11) As a child Laxmi thought that there might be something wrong with her own self. Laxmi felt that she did not belong as the public space of comfort is pre-defined and pre-structured which allows only certain bodies to inhabit that space. Normative space is comfortable for those who can inhabit it. “One does not notice this *as a world* when one has been shaped by that world, and even acquired its shape. Norms may not only have a way of disappearing from view, but may also be that which we do not consciously feel.” (Ahmed 425) When one is forced to fit into such space, it creates a sense of discomfort. Discomfort is a feeling when one cannot inhabit the social skin that is shaped by some bodies and not others.

As the eldest son of the family, Laxmi was expected to fulfil the role of the man of the house. The family expected her to manly. Only she knew that she could not fulfil 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.”(Tripathi 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. 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 became a *hijra*, a great burden was lifted off my head. I felt relaxed. I was now neither a man nor a woman. No longer did I feel like an alien” (Tripathi 43).

Laxmi was the author of her own life – a rarity for a *hijra*. She did not let anyone else rule her life. 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*.” (Tripathi 62-63) Laxmi wanted to change the mind-set of the people who consider *hijras* to be ugly. She thought of organising a beauty pageant for the *hijra* community. 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

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could be organised for *hijras* too. She writes; “Hijras are called born-clappers, but for a change, we would get the world clap for us.” (Tripathi 131) The event was a success and Laxmi was highly praised for her work.

The relationship between the dominant and the subordinate cannot be merely defined in terms of material benefits. It is also about the “ease and ability of the dominant groups to produce meanings, representations – which present their interests – perspectives, values, and frameworks in positive, self-evident terms.” (Grosz 197) The narrative of the dominant group occupies the centre and the narrative of the subordinate is relegated to the periphery. The dominant position gives them the power to narrate and also to silence some voices. Mostly the *hijras* are in the news for the wrong reason. They are often accused of kidnapping children and forcefully converting them into *hijra*. Laxmi dismisses such false allegation on them. It is not as if all the *hijras* are good. But when a *hijra* commits a wrong, the society does not forgive them. The *hijra* community too has its share of wrong doers just like the mainstream society. Laxmi dismisses several myths that are commonly associated with *hijras*. It is assumed that the funeral of a *hijra* takes place at the unearthly hour of night so that no one witnesses the funeral. Laxmi writes that it is “rubbish” as the funeral rite of a *hijra* is performed according to the religion the particular belongs to.

Violence against the *hijra* community is carried out as it is perceived that such identities transgress the normative gender identity. Violence is not necessarily physical in nature. It is also about policing one’s gender and its presentation in the public space which in turn immensely affects those lives that fall out of the way. The public space is accessible to only those identities that have been legitimised. Laxmi narrates her experience of being denied entry into a public space. She was invited to a sexuality conference as a speaker. A dinner party was organised for the delegates at Bombay Gymkhana Club which she was attending. She was very warmly welcomed by the organisers. But in the middle of the progressing party, she was asked to leave the party on the direction of the CEO of the club.

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She was told that the club rules did not allow people like her to enter the club. She was shocked that because of her *hijra* identity she was almost thrown out of the club.

Violence is also the denial of benefits provided by the government to *hijras* which can easily be availed by a man or a woman. Laxmi had to run from pillar to post to get her passport issued which she required to attend the Sixteenth World AIDS Conference in Toronto, Canada. She wanted that her passport should not refer to her as male or female but as a *hijra*. Her request for passport made the passport officer wonder as in his whole career he had never come across a *hijra* applying for passport. To obtain the passport she needed a certificate to prove that she had undergone sex change surgery from medical authorities. She went to the hospital to check if she could get such certificate. As Laxmi was not castrated, the doctor certified that though she was a biologically a male, her “social and psychological identity was that of a woman.” (Tripathi 82) This did the trick and Laxmi finally received her passport. In order to avail the services that are a legal right, *hijras* have to “justify their choices, describe their genitals, provide an autobiography upon demand, and educate the service providers.” (Namaste 45) Laxmi reiterates the fact that every third-gender person must have access to essential documents such as birth certificates, ration cards, passport and aadhaar card to help them establish their identity so that “they were not ‘missing persons’ or their country’s lost property.” (Tripathi 163)

Family too becomes a site of resistance to the acceptance of marginal identities. Laxmi had joined the *hijra* community without the knowledge of her parents. But when they came to know about it, they were shattered because they could not understand how a member of their family could become a *hijra*. Laxmi’s parents wanted that their child should lead ‘normal’ life. Michael Warner argues; “nearly everyone wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn’t seem to be a choice at all.” (Warner 53) We live in a culture where any difference is seen as deviance. One is made to believe that a person is free

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to live their life the way they want. But when we look deeper choice is actually a compulsion imposed on a person which is naturalised.

Laxmi's parents having internalised the notion that being a *hijra* is an abnormality, try to instil sense in the mind of their child. They ask Laxmi; "Tell us what your problem is. Don't you have everything going for you? You are educated and are a famous dancer. Why don't you concentrate on dancing? We'll give you money to start a business. What you have done is so damaging that we will have to hang our heads in shame Please get it out of your system." (Tripathi 48) Laxmi's parents thought that it was some kind of madness that had captivated their son and the only way to cure it was to get their son married to the prospective bride. They even began looking for the match keeping Laxmi in the dark. But Laxmi confronted her parents saying that she did not want to get married as it would spoil the two lives and if she was forced to do so there would be no option left to her but take her own life. Laxmi has been lucky enough that even though her family protested her becoming a *hijra* they finally gave in and accepted her as a member of the family. Such is not the fate of most of the *hijras* in India. Revathi in *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* was brutally mistreated by her family. She had to face the beatings of her brother. She was even denied her claim in the parental property. However, Laxmi remained to be the eldest son of the family. On the TV show *SachKaSaamna*, where Laxmi was a participant, her father said; "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." (Tripathi 123)

Laxmi's dominant identity was that 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 be 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.

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Laxmi's narrative is not biased. She not just critical of the mainstream society but she also critiques orthodox *hijras* who do not want to come out of the closet. Laxmi was discouraged by some *hijras* for still being a part of the mainstream society after becoming a *hijra*. She writes;

I had my detractors too. Lataguru continued to sulk. She felt I had been co-opted by the world of glamour, and she was totally opposed to this. To her way of thinking, I was a publicity-hungry sod. She also disapproved of the fact that I lived with my parents. She was possessive and orthodox 'Live with us *hijras* and not with your birth family,' Lataguru often reprimanded me. (Tripathi 72)

However, Laxmi did not see things in similar way. She wanted to be Raju, the eldest son to her family. She felt that she had a duty towards her family and after all her family had not been mean to her for becoming a *hijra*. She was of the opinion that a *hijra* too has the right to live with the family.

Laxmi lived in two parallel worlds in the same temporal and spatial space – one that she was related to by blood and the other that was her chosen family consisting of her *chelas*. It does seem to be a fairy tale but Laxmi made it a reality for herself. She was simultaneously present in both the worlds. She writes; "There are two houses on the same floor in the same building. Only a wall separates them. In one house, my mother, my brother Shashi and his wife, and their son Anshuman live. In the other, I live with my *chelas*. The doors of both houses are kept open all day. People freely move from one house to the other." (Tripathi 167) Laxmi has proved that the centre and margin can co-exist on the same platform. Both the worlds need to be inclusive. The society needs to change their attitude towards *hijras* and *hijras* too must be forthright.

Endnote

1. A space for women.

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