

## TRANSGENDER AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: ADVANCES IN HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE



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### Abstract:

'Third Gender' as stated by the law, *Hijras* as the tradition bearers, and as the umbrella term Transgender, covers all these expressions under its domain. The term 'third gender' came to practice after the verdict of Supreme Court of India on 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2014 and recognized the transgender as 'third gender.' Apart from the law and order it enabled for the protection of transgender, and projected the need to establish human rights in the society for transgender. There is a need to protect and promote the rights of transgender and this cannot be achieved by documenting it in the form of a law, in isolation. Literature also plays a vital role in establishing and asserting human rights in society as it reveals manifold forms of lives and helps in a deep understanding of the social system. It not only portrays the imitation of human action but also serves as a corrective mirror and brings in a positive change as it gets circulated and reaches the larger readers. The objective of this paper is to present that apart from law and rules, literature is also an important tool to sensitize and establish human rights in society. This paper will study and analyze some of the literary texts i.e., autobiographies written by transgender from India from a human rights perspective.

Keywords: *Autobiography, Human Rights, Transgender, Laws*

Transgender studies is a subfield of LGBT studies (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual) and it provides an interdisciplinary approach to gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, women studies and sexology by dealing with the intersections of sex and gender intertwined with the culture, lives and political movements. Transgender studies further deals with the social and political ramifications related to the community which includes transgender history, liberation, literature, ethnography, anthropology, psychology and health related issues. Transgender studies is an established area in the West with the efforts of theorists like Judith Butler, Simone De Beauvoir and Magnus Hirschfield and academicians such as Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker who initiated the first non-medical academic journal *Transgender Studies Quarterly* in 2014 devoted to transgender issues. In India, the *hijras* are a visible community and directly or indirectly we have read and heard the mythologies, beliefs and ideas related to the *hijras* and *hijra* community. They are an important part of India's cultural beliefs as the harbinger of blessings on the newlyweds and newborn children. Their visibility in the society is in contrast to their absence from the academia in India. This doesn't imply that their indifference makes them the subject of investigation but there is a need for a space of discourse which has been narrow. Their discourse should not be confined to the domain of gender studies as



there is much more that is needed and can be unraveled from within.

### Third Gender

‘Third Gender’ as *hijras* are usually referred in India, to denote transgender was introduced in 1975 by M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies, who employed it to draw attention to the ethnographic evidence that gender categories in some cultures could not be adequately explained with a two-gender framework. This revelation had profound implications for feminist and gender theorists as well as for social movements and political activists in the United States, as it allowed them to think outside a dichotomous gender system. ‘Third gender’ began to be applied to behaviors that transcended or challenged male-female codes or norms. It was also applied to societies that seemed to provide institutionalized intermediate gender concepts and practices. In India, the term ‘third gender’ came to practice after the verdict of Supreme Court of India on April, 15, 2014 and recognized the transgender as ‘third gender.’ ‘*Tritya Prakriti*’ is another expression in Sanskrit that was used to define ‘third gender’ in pre-colonial India. The term was taken from Hindu texts (*Puranas*) and mythologies which defined *tritya prakriti* as third gender which would encompass any gender outside the dichotomous framework.

Will Roscoe in the book *Changing ones: Third and Fourth Gender* (1998) introspects about the changing gender roles in North America, “Third gender generally refers to male berdaches and female berdaches, while fourth gender always refer to female berdaches”. The term ‘berdache’ is an anthropological term used in North America as a whole to define multiple gender significations. The term is not synonymous to Indian *hijra* or transgender as a whole. The term was replaced with ‘two-spirit’ and it has sacred, spiritual and ceremonial role connotations and has nothing to do with identities and their sexual orientation. It can

be concluded that there are cultural connotations and beliefs related to a certain identity that cannot be justified or measured by a given parameter. The Indian *hijra* and the North American *berdache* includes people with distinct and a few similar identities and orientations but it doesn’t necessarily put them under same roof. The two terms are not synonymous but are alike.

### TG Rights and Laws in India

Human rights are integral to all the genders, male, female and the third gender. All the rights are assigned by the Indian Constitution. With the legalization of transgender as ‘third gender’ there are laws and rights enacted in favour of them. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code dating back to 1860 was introduced during the British rule in India which criminalizes sexual activities ‘against the order of nature’ arguably the homosexual sexual activities. It was decriminalized by High Court of Delhi on July 2009 but the judgment was overturned by the Supreme Court of India on 11 December 2013. On Feb 6, 2016, it was decided by the Chief Justice of India T.S. Thakur that it will be reviewed afresh by a five-member constitutional bench. A. Revathi, a trans-woman and activist, retrospects in *A Life in Transactivism*: “society thinks that vaginal or penetrative sex is the only kind of sex that is ‘natural.’ Transgender persons are not even regarded as people. We are seen as sexual deviants who are meant to satisfy only the perverse pleasures of male clients” (59). Though there is a legal recognition of the gender identity of the transgender, the paradox faced by them is the criminalization by section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. It violates their right to life, autonomy, dignity guaranteed under Article 21, right to equality under Article 14 and their right to expression and freedom under Article 19 as the petition states. Further the Transgender protection of Rights Bill, 2016 has been enacted by the parliament which seeks to:



- define a transgender person;
- prohibit discrimination against transgender person;
- confer right upon transgender person to be recognized as such, and a right to self-perceived gender identity;
- issue of certificate of identity to transgender persons;
- provide that no establishment shall discriminate against transgender person
- in matters relating to employment, recruitment, promotion and other related issues;
- provide for grievance redressal mechanism in each establishment;
- establishment of a National Council for Transgender;
- punishment for contraventions of the provisions of the Bill (1-10).

Apart from the laws that are enacted for the welfare of transgenders, the other issues that can be addressed or included for their upliftment in the society as Dhishna P, an Indian critic in her study suggests in “Implications of Gender Studies: Male, Female and the Third Genders” (2016):

The process of understanding gender identity is a more complex task as the notions of gender are unlimited with the body, the psyche, desires and passion of individuals. Normativity in sexual identity remains a cultural construct. When one talks about gender rights all these aspects need to be taken into consideration simultaneously. This could reason for the marginalized genders to gain more relevance in the present (10).

The above nuances related to transgender were entitled in the bill for their amelioration but the question arises; is it actually benefitting them to get a secure and a respectable position in the society? More than everything there is a need to establish and spread awareness regarding transgender rights as they suffer persistent inequalities in the aspects of life at the hands of the society.

They are subjected to trans-phobic attacks which results in non-acceptance in the society. Trans-phobia refers to expressions of fear and hatred of trans-people. There is need to understand the affect of myriad forms of oppressions that they face. Viviane Namaste in *Sex Change, Social Change* (2005) argues:

Transsexual lives are ordered, governed, and controlled in and through the criminalization of prostitution.” Moreover, both she and Mirha-Soleil Ross claim that trans-women suffer not only due to the poverty, homelessness, illness, and discrimination attendant on their lower socioeconomic backgrounds, but also as sex workers, in which work the majority experience violence that goes unnoticed (27).

Oppression on *hijras* as sex-workers is also rampant and *hijra* autobiographies give evidence to such conduct. Revathi in her autobiography *The Truth about Me* (2010) recalls her experience while she was walking on the streets for sex work. Having figured out by the man that she is a transgender she was beaten and kicked by the man. She retrospects:

Khoja! Fuck! Shouting, he pulled me by my hair, threw me down and kicked me. He beat me again, and then rushed to his car and took out a knife. I hit at his hand and the knife dropped. I tried to run, but he pulled at my sari. He kept pulling until he had stripped me of it, and I was down to my petticoat and blouse (215).

Law and order form the rules but law and literature together can bring in the much needed parity and acceptance. A. Revathi in her book *A Life in Trans Activism* (2016) clearly portrays the change that literature can bring. She mentions, “The overwhelming public response for my books is the source of great satisfaction for me. I feel that the reason I took to writing has been validated” (xiii).



## Literature and Transgender

Literature also plays a vital role in establishing and asserting human rights in society as it reveals manifold forms of lives and helps in a deep understanding of the social system. As defined in *Encyclopedia Britannica*;

Literature is a body of written works. The name has traditionally been applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution. The art of literature is not reducible to the words on the page; they are there solely because of the craft of writing. As an art, literature might be described as the organization of words to give pleasure. Yet through words literature elevates and transforms experience beyond “mere” pleasure. Literature also functions more broadly in society as a means of both criticizing and affirming cultural values.

It not only portrays the imitation of human action but also serves as a corrective mirror and brings in a positive change as it gets circulated and reaches the larger readers. In this context, the autobiographies that have been chosen for this study are Vidya’s *I am Vidya* (2007), A. Revathi’s *The Truth about Me* (2010). These two autobiographies portray the experiences (physical and mental) in various stages of their lives especially during transition from a cisgender to a transgender and then further acceptance and inclusion to the society. This paper will highlight the various incidents where they put in their courage to stand up for themselves in the face of stiff opposition and go forward in their quest for self-completion. The focus is on the experiences and atrocities as faced by transgenders at the hand of society as revealed in the autobiography and the need for transgender human rights. Literature can play as a tool in order to sensitize and spread awareness in the society.

## Autobiography as a Genre of Literary Studies in Research

Autobiography is a literary genre known for its use by women to write about their hidden lives. Mary Evans introspects, “The feminist ‘project’ of using autobiography to uncover the hidden lives of women is just one example of the use to which genre can be put” (37). With the advent of time, autobiography as a genre is also used by transgender to express their deeper self. It is new literary genre in picture. Though there are various genres of literary composition used by the writers to depict transgender in their works, but autobiography as a research method and as a genre used by transgender “demonstrates the way in which individuals are perceived and judged both within a culture and by those with more distance from it” (37). The major genres in literature are poetry, prose, drama, autobiography and biography. The main feature that settles autobiography as genre is that of offering insight into the extent to which a particular individual can be understood and evaluated. It becomes less about the person and more about the relationship between the individual and the society. But it is important to distinguish the motives responsible for different kinds of autobiography. “Autobiography can be-and often is-about an individual, but as well as being either by or about an individual, it can also be a collective subject” (38). Simone De Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* is an example of autobiography written about escape from a certain social milieu. It can be concluded in the words of Mary Evans that: “When individuals write autobiographies, they often locate themselves as people who have had a battle against a particular culture” (38). So, autobiographical method of research holds a very significant place in research and autobiography makes it possible for marginalized genders to reach a larger domain. It can be inferred that autobiography is a tool for marginalized genders to write about their hidden lives. Other genres can’t do a similar justice with the marginalized





subjects as the essence to express one's individual self in relation with the culture and society will be lost.

'Third Gender', the lawful signification given by Supreme Court of India to *hijras* (eunuchs) in order to protect their rights and interests, but the question arises; Is it actually helping them to evolve or stumble on a decent place in the society or the social system? Their status in the society is self explanatory to this question. "They continued to beat me, and I continued to scream. When the train stopped at Pimpri, someone shouted, 'Push the creature out!'" (I am Vidya, 102). It succinctly portrays the atrocities that a transgender face in their day to day lives. This brings into the much needed factor to be incorporated in the social system in order to protect the rights of transgender i.e. human rights. Human Rights are moral principles and they are inherent to all human beings regardless of their nation, location, religion, caste, creed, ethnicity, sex or sexuality. They are universal laws and they are egalitarian in the sense of being same to each and every one. The basic idea of human rights movements emanated after the Second World War and the atrocities of the Holocaust culminating in the adoption of Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris by United Nations Assembly in 1948. The case of transgender or the *hijra* community is totally opposite in this regard as in India, though they are given the status of 'third gender', still transgenders are looked down with ridicule and disrespect. As mentioned in the Writ petition (Civil) No.400 of 2012 versus Writ petition (Civil) 604 of 2013 regarding transgender community in India;

Our society often ridicules and abuses the Transgender community and in public places like railway stations, bus stands, workplaces, theatres, hospitals, they are sidelined and treated as untouchables forgetting the fact that the moral failure lies in the society's unwillingness to contain or embrace different

gender identities and expressions, a mindset which we have to change (2).

With the coming of gender fluid identities and identities that are tailored by sex assignment surgeries, it is expected of cisgenders to embody and encapsulate these changes in the society. Further as mentioned in the Writ Petition, where they have referred the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who was of the view that "at the basis of all conceptions of justice, no matter which culture or religion has inspired them, lies the golden rule that you should treat others as you would want everybody to treat everybody else, including yourself" (107). Further the reference to John Rawl's notion of Justice as 'fairness' is combined with the notions of Distributive Justice, to which Noble Laureate Prof. Amartya Sen subscribed;

We get jurisprudential basis for doing justice to Vulnerable Groups which include TGs. Once it is accepted that the TGs are also a part of Vulnerable Groups and marginalized sections of the society, we are only bringing them within the fold of aforesaid rights recognized in respect of other classes falling in the marginalized group. This is the minimum riposte in an attempt to assuage the insult and injury suffered by them so far as to pave way for fast tracking the realization of their human rights (109).

Vidya in her autobiography *I am Vidya* describes the importance of literature to fight depression and overcome fear. She writes, "Literature and solitude were my companions" (41). Vidya through her autobiography tries to communicate her turmoil of being a woman in a man's body followed by her fear of 'coming out' as female. "I had no problem with people recognizing my femininity but hated it when they made fun of me on that account" (56). In the process, she tried to hide her femininity due to the non-acceptance of a transgender in the society. It is not about the acceptance or non-acceptance of a



transgender in the social system, but the way society treats them. She mentions:

I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from outside world. I took particular trouble to remain inconspicuous at college, my unpleasant memories of my bitter experience at school still afresh in my mind. I tried to lead a false life of strenuous attempts like a man and speak like one. (40).

Despite her efforts to hide her femininity she couldn't hide it and was made fun of, ridiculed and considered repository of shame by her classmates in the school. Vidya retrospects:

Crude puns were invented by my classmates to scribble my name along with them on blackboard- for instance adding suffix 'ali', a colloquialism for eunuchs, to regular Tamil words to describe me. (32).

Being a transgender, A. Revathi in her autobiography *The Truth About Me* brings up the duties that are expected of a male child in the family. She gives instances of her friend who wanted to undergo transition but couldn't. "My friend did not want to go to Delhi with me. He was an only son and so he decided to live at home, hiding his feminine feelings, expressing them only on the hill-top" (36). Due to the approach of the society and family he was holding back his desires and chose to continue his life as a male. She also adds the lack of support from her family and the ill treatment by her brother because of her decision to be transgender and had undergone Sex- reassignment surgery. "My brothers came home when my father was not there and threatened me, 'you pottai motherfucker! Be glad that we've let you in sari! Think you can hang around with those number nines, with your cock chopped off, and still demand your share of property'" (168). This was the intense struggle Revathi had to undergo to be accepted by the family. Revathi fought for her house with his father

as she built it. She feels that it is a step in assertion of rights of the *hijras* to have the right to own property. It is significant step to reclaim the lost spaces.

Vidya's autobiography gives instances about the violence being inflicted on her and on transgenders as a whole and there is no one to raise a voice against it or provide protection. How can one be a mute spectator to such violence and injustice? Being *hijras*, *pottais* or *trirunangais* doesn't mean they would live their life devoid of the basic human rights. Vidya mentions:

Now four or five people surrounded me again. One of them held my arms and intertwined them between the stairs of the ladder to upper berth. Another pulled my hair. A third thug belted me with the buckle end hitting my face. His wild swing of belt found my cheekbone and I started bleeding (102).

If someone beats me, pinches me, scolds me, I hurt. I long for respect. I want to live a life of dignity. I want to go to work as many women do. But who gives people like me love? Or respect? Who offers us clothes to hide our shame? When I am hungry who feeds me? Did I come with a mission at birth, wanting to be a pottai? I did not imagine that I would talk endlessly on several roads, begging, doing sex work (*I am Vidya* 220).

In "Living Smile Vidya's Traumatic Experiences- an Overview" by S. Ramya writes: "The title of all the 15 chapters (*Appa, A time for farewell, Accept me!, Chatla, I want to live with pride*) by itself explains the trauma she underwent throughout her life" (34). Vidya shares her experiences while staying in hostel during the college days. She adds; "I had to share a room with my mates in Madurai. Fear and worry dominated my thoughts, even thought they were all boys. In my heart, I knew I was not a male and that made me nervous. My nights were hell, filled with the fear of detection and ridicule by the students



gathered there” (41). The fear in the mind of transgender is rampant because the societal stereotypical mindset to treat them in an ill manner. M. Mondal in the study “Gender Geometry: A Study of Revathi’s Autobiography” mentions, “even though transgender identities have legal approval, and is currently enjoying much attention in the academic domain— “Trans identities were one of the most written about subjects of the late twentieth century” (Whittle xi) but the ground reality narrates a saga of social discrimination and psychic torture” (126).

A. Revathi’s autobiography *The Truth About Me* begins with a Preface that tells the clear motive of writing the autobiography;

As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of society. Yet I have dared to share my innermost life with you--- about being a hijra and also doing sex work [...] My aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires [...] I hope now that by publishing my life story, larger changes can be achieved. I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the rights to live in this society. (v-vi)

## Conclusion

To conclude, there is a need to translate human rights into transgender rights. This can be achieved with the help of literature as it is also an important tool to sensitize and promote transgender rights in the society. The social system needs to take off their stigma and work towards accepting them as individuals as part of the society. To achieve this end, transgender rights need to be implemented in the society. Law and Literature together can pave the way for this social change. A Revathi’s poetical lines in *A Life in Trans Activism* that sums their expectations from cisgenders, “We will continue to struggle, we ask not for your

pity, only your understanding” (68) suggests this unending struggle of transgenders to establish their gender identity.

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