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Liminality, Gender Performativity and Transgender Subjectivity: A Study of A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me*

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KEYWORDS

A. Revathi, transgender identity, liminality, gender performativity, hijra gharana, rites of passage.

ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the lived realities of transgender persons in India via an analysis of the autobiography of A. Revathi, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. The study draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's notion of "becoming" to explore the deep dissonance between biological assignment and internal selfhood. The paper maps this trajectory through Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner's anthropological frameworks of the rites of passage, specifically the stages of separation, liminality, and incorporation. This analysis shows how institutional trauma and social alienation push transgender persons into the marginal space of the *hijra gharana*, a site of *communitas*, yet unable to protect them from structural hostility. The paper also discusses the medical and biopolitical challenges of Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) and claims that physical integration into a female body does not mean social integration. Transgender people are consistently and constantly put into a liminal space, with the fierce and heteronormative society and the continued global transphobia, despite the immense psychological and physical trauma that they go through. In the end, Revathi's story is an important critique of strict gender binaries and calls for a radical rethink of social inclusion, bodily autonomy and human dignity.

1. Introduction

Some lives are lived in normative brightness, others in deep uncertainty. From birth, people are given binary labels of male or female and then are expected to perform within the normative boxes of heteronormative societal frameworks. Judith Butler (1990) argues in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that gender is not a fixed or biologically determined category, but rather something which is constructed

through stylized repetition of acts and behaviors. This framework is especially useful for understanding the lived experience of transgender people, who are known by different names in South Asian cultural contexts such as *hijra*, *pottai* or *kinnar*. The United Nations Human Rights Office uses the term "transgender" to refer to an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth. The transgender community has been in India for

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centuries and has historically been acknowledged in different cultural and social frameworks, but their status today is mostly marginalized. This marginalization is structurally and violently marked in the daily interactions. In recent years, transgender people have started to speak out about the trauma of living in a heteronormative society. One of them is A. Revathi, a Bangalore-based transgender writer and activist who, in the preface, writes powerfully about her struggle for identity and rights: “As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of society” (Revathi, 2010).

Her books include *Unarvum Uruvamumn* (2004) and the critically acclaimed *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) that she originally wrote in Tamil and was translated into English by feminist historian V. Geetha. In her autobiography, Revathi narrates her journey from Doraisamy to A. Revathi and the structural barriers to existence and validation faced by a trans person in society. Revathi actively subverts the identity imposed upon her in childhood, driven by overwhelming inner conflict and a deep desire to live as a woman in her completeness.

2. Beauvoir and the State of Liminality: The Strife of Becoming

In *The Second Sex* (2011), Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational statement sets the context for discord between biological assignment and internal selfhood: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 283). This view stresses the fact that gender is influenced by social, cultural and historical factors and not by pure biology. For transgender people, this idea legitimizes the dissonance between biological sex and lived reality

of gender. Born as a boy, Revathi knew from a young age that she was a woman and spoke about the alienation she experienced in a body that wasn’t hers. She was caught between two conflicting genders and experienced emotional unrest and identity confusion.

This condition of “betweenness” or ‘betwixt’ is best characterized through the anthropological notion of liminality. In *The Rites of Passage* (1909/1960) Arnold Van Gennep first used the term liminality to describe a transitional state in which a person exists between two social positions. Van Gennep defined human transitions by three distinctive stages: separation, liminality, and incorporation. This was further developed by Victor Turner (1969) who stressed the liminal phase as a state where people “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (p. 95). In the context of Revathi’s life, this liminal phase reflects the excruciating challenge of relinquishing a male identity while striving to attain a recognised female identity. Revathi (2010) describes this inner turmoil:

I felt I was a woman in a man’s body. But how could that possibly be? Would the world take me so? I wanted to be known as a woman and I felt pain at being called a man... I wondered why God had chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why He could not have created me all male or all female. (p. 15)

Here, Revathi’s despair is a sign of the fatalistic weight of the gender binary. She does not fit into the categories of “wholly male” or “wholly female”

and this gives her a deep feeling of being “flawed.” This is an example of how societal expectations become internalized as psychological trauma.

3. Separation: Alienation and Institutional Trauma

This internal conflict produced a sense of isolation which gradually began to alienate Revathi from the mainstream society. Ever since childhood she had felt an inborn tendency toward the feminine, dancing, playing with girls, and being attracted to men, which led to a painful inner conflict between what society said was right and wrong. She recalls, "I was drawn to the boys who did not tease me... I was a boy and yet I felt I could love other boys. Was that right or wrong?" (Revathi, 2010, p. 9).

This trauma was worsened in the institutional setting of her school, where peers and teachers cruelly ridiculed her expressions with derogatory names like Ali or Number 9. Revathi (2010) speaks of the physical and emotional abuse: "I remember being caned for not being brave like a boy... [The PT teacher] would box my ears and yell, 'Are you a girl or what? "Pull your trousers down, let me check"' (p. 7). This constant humiliation pushed Revathi into Van Gennep's first stage: separation. She began to look for others who shared her gendered reality, detaching herself from her assigned social identity.

Her first contact with the trans community opened her eyes to the possibilities of transformation, but also to the stark realities of transgender life. They taught her the *hijra gharana* (household) system and the surgical procedures for becoming a woman, but they also exposed her to the omnipresent threat of sexual violence. Upon hearing about the

coercive sexual acts that are normalized in the community, Revathi indicated a desire to transition and marry conventionally before having sexual relations. "laughed derisively" (Revathi, 2010, p. 19) by her peers who said, "If you are a girl-boy you have no choice. You don't know this? "Don't you want to have sex like this?" (Revathi, 2010, p.19). This exchange highlights the grim reality that transgender bodies are often perceived as unprotected by society, which removes their bodily autonomy and relegates their existence to hyper-sexualized peripheries.

4. *Communitas* in the *Hijra Gharana*

Revathi entered the liminal stage because she was unable to identify with her assigned identity or to fully embody her female identity. She went to Dindigul to join a hijra gharana, where she was taken as a *chela* (disciple) by a *guru*. This phase is representative of Turner's (1969) notion of *communitas*: a deep sense of togetherness and solidarity that grows among disadvantaged people during transitional periods. Turner describes *communitas* as a "transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared" (p. 138).

The *hijra gharana* acts as an alternative kinship model for those banished from biological families. In the *gharana*, Revathi found the motherly affection, acceptance and care that was denied to her by her own family. The *gharana* functioned as a refuge where bonds were formed in common pain and collective support, and not in strict social binaries. As Revathi (2010) reflects, "I felt a love between us that was inexplicable. It was as if God

himself had created hearts such as these to protect and care for people like me" (p. 23). Outside the safety of the *gharana*, however, the hostility of the public sphere remained pervasive. They were openly objectified, with people asking whether their bodies were "original or duplicate" (Revathi, 2010, p. 29), further entrapping Revathi in a social liminality. This public harassment illustrates that while the *gharana* provides emotional shelter, it is not able to entirely shield its members from the structural liminality imposed by the outside world.

5. The Illusion of Incorporation: Enduring Marginalization and Medical Transition

To resolve this liminality, Revathi sought to attain Van Gennep's final stage of incorporation, through Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). Revathi, who successfully performed femininity in her daily life, experienced a disjunction between her outward expression and embodied reality, stating that "after wearing women's clothes, and trying to live like a woman, I still felt that I was a man" (Revathi, 2010, p. 67).

The quest for SRS in the Indian context is beset with social, economic, and medical hurdles. Revathi had to undergo surgery in appalling and unregulated medical conditions, with scant resources and the blessing of her *guru*. She describes lying on a cot without a mattress, and enduring excruciating pain without adequate anesthesia or post-operative care, "This was a major operation: the very core of my life was to be removed and who knows if I would survive it... I felt great fear. "If God had made me a woman I could have avoided all this" (Revathi, 2010, p. 70). When she cried out in pain, a nurse callously told

onlookers she just had "stomach pain," illustrating the secrecy, lack of ethical medical oversight, and incredible exposure of transgender healthcare. Thus, the physical process of incorporation is shaped by systemic neglect and economic destitution rather than informed, dignified medical care.

Physical incorporation into a female body does not necessarily imply social incorporation. Revathi achieved the physical form she craved, but her social acceptance was fiercely contested. "Why can't you be like other men?" mocked a lady police officer over surgery in a critical case at a railway station. "Why can't you just be normal?" (Revathi, 2010, p. 80) This interaction shows how the transgender identity is always liminal in a heteronormative society. Globally, too, such resistance has manifested itself in the responses of prominent cultural figures like J.K. Rowling and Germaine Greer, who have continually spoken against the legitimacy of identity of trans women, upholding biological essentialism and denying transgender people full social inclusion.

6. Conclusion

Revathi's story shows that transgender identity is not a linear progression but a constant ongoing negotiation shaped by social, cultural and institutional forces. The frameworks of gender performativity and liminality show that transgender existence is characterized by ongoing "betweenness." They reaffirm the ongoing marginality of transgender people, because even in their transformed states the lack of social recognition precludes full inclusion. In conclusion, Revathi's life story subverts binary gender systems

and necessitates a restructuring of social systems to recognize different identities.

A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me* is a moving account of the difficult path of transgender people living in a world restricted to gender binaries. Against the backdrop of performativity and rites of passage, Revathi's story shows that the move from male to female is not just a bodily change, but a difficult negotiation of social life. While enduring immense trauma to achieve physical incorporation, the pervasive stigma and structural violence of

heteronormative society continually forces transgender individuals back into a marginalized, liminal space.

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