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Struggle of Redefining Sexuality and Questing Approbation in *The Truth About Me*

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Abstract: Life possesses several conundrums for an individual, but for transgender after discovering their sexual identity life itself turns out to be a conundrum. It takes great pain and discombobulation for an individual to confront one's own sexual identity which contradicts one's birth sexuality. But after overcoming all encumbrances and coming to terms with their sexual identity, transgender accomplishes nothing other than ostracism, criticism and disdain. Because in a dominant patriarchal heteronormative society transgender is considered as an oddity, an outsider and a subject of mockery. The quandary of transgender testifies the deep rooted gendered bias and lack of humanity in so-called society which boasts of democracy and broad-mindedness. Myth credits sanctity and impeccable characteristics to transgender. Whereas, the autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi deconstructs the mythical view by depicting the dark and down to earth reality of transgender predicament where survival is attainable only after pawning one's body to sex work after being abandoned by family, culture and society as a whole. This paper penetrates deep into the life of transgender by foregrounding their plight in all levels starting with their search for identity, empowerment, liberation, equality, etc., thereby drawing humanity's attention to the trials and tribulations faced by the transgender community. Besides, it is an endeavor to create an egalitarian attitude among people where every individual choice of gender and feelings would be accepted and esteemed.

Keywords: Cultural hegemony, gender-binary, mythology, heteronormativity, penury.



Mythopoeic Construct of Transgender in Hinduism

Though myth is usually regarded as an imaginary and fabricated tale its significance in formulating beliefs and principles of ideal existence for humanity cannot be neglected. Myth is regarded as the mother of culture which cultivates the feeling of oneness among individuals, thereby shaping the world view and by crediting value to humankind's existence as Rollo May points out, "A Myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence" (May, p.17). In another context the alliance between myth and humanity is mystical and ironical. Myth is a lacuna which at the very outset exemplifies falsification, but still humanity clings to it to enforce sense in the senseless world by adhering its code of morality and togetherness.

Myth portrays a transgender as an epitome of virtue with undefiled characteristics. Myth renders godliness to transgender and always places them above binary genders. During ancient times transgender enjoyed certain privileges, reverence and even acted as a confidant to the queens. In earlier times people used to read the scriptures a lot and understood the concept of greatness and unique traits in everything created by God. Besides, scriptures enabled people to accept things and individual the way they are in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the society. But later with the intervention of science and advancement which sowed seeds for atheistic beliefs people deliberately distanced themselves away from the creator and myth, thereby demarcating boundaries among beings and confined their open-minded thoughts about gender fluidity with stagnancy.

In order to trace the dynamic shift that has taken place in the life of a transgender from being a person with respect to a subject of humiliation it is important to locate their place in myth. Truth is considered as a totem of transgender identity which is attributed as a blessing for them by the Lord Rama. The myth says when Lord Rama has been sent on an exile for fourteen years, his subjects, both men and women followed him. But Lord Rama has ordered all men and women to return to their houses. After fourteen years, Lord Rama on his way to his hometown sees a group of people awaiting for him and asks "Who are you? Why haven't you gone back to your homes in the city? They replied Swamy! We belong to neither to mankind, nor to womankind. You said then that men, women and children ought to return to the city. But you did not ask us to go.



Bound by your wishes, we remained here” (p. 45). After hearing this Lord Rama becomes astound and offers them a boon, “Whatever you speak will be true. Your words will come true” (p.45). This story testifies how transgender is viewed as an incarnation of truth and the pervasiveness of this mythic belief among mankind has given access to the transgender to stabilize a position for themselves in the society. Besides, in the earlier times Transgender are well accepted in the women’s community as stated earlier many transgender acted as a queen confidant. The myth that transgender have received blessing from the almighty Lord Rama has enabled mankind to see them as God in disguise as Revathi points out, “So, from that da onwards, people here have believed that a hijra’s word will come true and think of us as godly beings. They hold that it is good to start the day by seeing a hijra. Those who run businesses think that the day will go well for them if they give us money and earn our blessings” (p. 45). Mankind fears offending transgender and treats them with due respect thinking any hurt caused to transgender would bring them bad luck and incur god’s wrath. But this is not the case today, the reason is that transgender gets acceptance neither in mankind, nor in womankind community rather in the middle, which dislocates them from their position in the center to the periphery.

Identity construct is inevitably linked with the myth as George points out, “Myth power arises from its ability to articulate the existential need for identity and allows individuals to locate oneself within the community’s worldview and, as such, shared mythological and cosmological understandings of gender possibilities affect identity on the levels of both individual formation and social cohesion” (George, 2). A myth is an indigenous phenomenon in human life which guides and inculcates ethics, culture, habits, behavior, social code etc. in an individual thereby creating an identity which secures a place within a community. Though transgender identity and their acceptance in the society are viewed as a hot potato in contemporary environment the concept of third gender is not at all new because there is a representation of a transgender named Aravan in Bhagavad Gita. The character Aravan represents the identity crisis, pathos and plight of the whole transgender community.

Aravan is a transgender son born for Arjuna and Ulupi. In the Kurukshetra war which occurred between Kauravas and Pandavas to secure victory there is a practice of offering human sacrifice to goddess Kali. Therefore Pandavas in order to win the war decided to sacrifice a man who is perfect in every way. Aravan volunteers himself to be sacrificed but as a last wish he asks, “I want to marry a



woman and enjoy, however fleetingly, conjugal bliss” (p. 260). Fearing widowhood no woman’s consent to marry him, therefore God Krishna assumes the form of a woman named Mohini and marries him. After enjoying the conjugal bliss, Aravan sacrifices himself for Pandavas’ victory in the war with content heart. In the epic Aravan is portrayed as a heroic figure who got an acceptance in the male community. Though Aravan possess effeminate characteristics he loves to project himself as a man that is why he desires to marry a woman and not a man. It is culturally believed by transgender community that Aravan is their ancestor who has started the concept of third-gender community. Therefore platonically all transgender consider Aravan to be their husband and performs the ritual of marriage and widowhood by taking the role of Mohini.

There is a stark contrast between Aravan and transgender that is Aravan even after discovering his effeminate traits desired to be male. Whereas transgender on the other hand desires for their acceptance as woman and not as man. Therefore transgender view themselves as a wife of Aravan and performs the ritual as Revathi says, “On the day of the full moon in the month of Chitirai and thousands of people congregate for the celebrations and make a vow to tie a thali to Aravan in the temple. After the temple chariot is drawn through the streets the next day and the ritual sacrifice carried out, they break their bangles and rip off their thalis” (p. 259).

Myth credits sanctity and impeccable virtues to transgender whereas the transgender in contemporary society are going through an array of identity challenges. Every transgender for that matter desire to live the life of a woman like marrying a man and settling down as a family with children. But woman refuses to accept them as one because they feel like transgender are distorting their feminine attributes by mimicking them. Besides, transgender indulge in the sex trade and this is one of the foremost reasons for women to look down upon transgender. On the other hand men refuses to accept and respect their changes because of the vibe of patriarchy and pride in manliness who view women as weak beings as Shakespeare points out, “Frailty, thy name is woman” (Shakespeare, 146).

The society and binary-genders are doing a great injustice to transgender community by refusing their acceptance and way of life by creating lots of prejudice as Kate points out, “It’s easy to fictionalize an issue when you’re not aware of the many ways in which you are privileged by it” (Kate, 24). It is time to



re-locate transgender space in myth and give them human space if not divine and to raise awareness of gender fluidity as Judith Butler points out, “Gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a ‘one’ who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today (Butler, xxii). It is time to raise the veil of gender stagnancy through myth by hosting transactional gender roles.

Exploring Resurgence of Trans-Identity

As soon as a child is born in a society the notion of gender identity gets attached to it before anything else. Even the name of a child is determined by having a look at its sex organ. The preconceived notion of gender exerts a significant role in the society that if a person tries to transcend its boundaries he or she will be credited with the label of ‘other’. Gender identity is an individual choice and right, whereas culture and society have encroached its space, thereby guiding an individual in developing personality, behavior and attitude within a narrow rigid boundary of gender binary as Hyde points out, “Gender Binary is defined as the belief that sex is binary and directly determines gender” (Hyde, 171).

Gender Identity plays a multifaceted role in politics, society, institution, family, economy, religion, etc. In Indian cultural context, gender identity is something inevitable and one cannot escape from its obligation because it is the hub for patriarchal dominance and politics as Rich points out,

At the core of patriarchy is the individual family unit with its division of roles, its values of...unpaid domestic services of the wife, obedience to authority, judgement and punishment for disobedience, Within this family children learn the characters, sexual and otherwise, that they are to assume, in their turn, as adults. The sacrency of the family in the patriarchy- sacred in the sense that it is heresy to question its ultimate value-relives the titular head of it from any real necessity to justify his behavior (Rich, 86).

This illustrates how gender identity doesn’t stop at one point rather continues its dominance like a chain of reaction, thereby passing its traits as an inheritance to the next generation. Gender identity is used as a hallucinatory drug to make women inherently believe in the gender stereotypes formulated by the patriarchal community to enjoy privileges and supremacy. Besides, Tran’s people discovery of their identity has created a crisis among gender-binary because it has shaken the core of gender stereotypes



and roles thereby nullifying the so-called identity of gender stagnancy. In the text *The Truth About Me*, Revathi gives a down-to-earth journey of her sexual identity discovery and the challenges that she overcomes in asserting and living her life as a transgender. Revathi's childhood name is Doraisamy and she discovers her bodily changes as a female at a very young age to be precise when she is studying in class five. Initially her family didn't mind her behaving like a girl because they thought it to be her childhood craze as they say, "He'll outgrow all this when he grows older" (p. 4). Even Revathi herself is not aware of the transformation that has surfaced and considers it as a state of normalcy and finds happiness in playing girls' games, sweeping front yard, drawing kolam and helping her mother in the kitchen, sweeping, swabbing and washing vessels as she says, "I did know that I behaved like a girl, it felt natural for me to do so. I did not know how to be like a boy. It was like eating for me- just as I would not stop eating because someone asked me not to eat, I felt I could not stop being a girl, because others told me I ought not to be so" (p. 7).

The society sees transgender as an odd figure because the idea of binary gender is infused in their normative behavior and considers anything outside the binary to be unnatural, but on the contrary transgender feels their changes in behavioral pattern to be quite normal. Besides, transgender first discovers their feminine identity by associating their closeness with a woman in every aspect like behavior, walk, attitude, dress, bodily movements, household chores etc. as she says,

As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my
sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my
head and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then
as if I was a shy bride, my eyes to the ground, and everyone would laugh (p. 4).

The foremost reason for people to view transgender with disgust is that they think transgender are deliberately accepting and naturalizing female roles. But in reality it is not the case because hormonal changes make them to embrace feminine nature and people are not capable of understanding them because they don't realize what it is mean to undergo hormonal changes. Hormonal changes are irresistible like a drug as Mafi points out, "I don't know what's happening to me. They are called hormones" (Mafi, 172). Besides, gender change is considered to be a heinous crime because society feels it will result in chaos, but transgender feels it to be their birthright and constantly engages in



activism to contradict binary thereby questioning why gender change is an unacceptable phenomenon as Ellen points out,

People changed lots of other personal things all the time. They dyed their hair and dieted themselves to near death. They took steroids to build muscles and got breast implants and nose jobs so they'd resemble their favorite movie stars. They changed names and majors ad jobs and husbands and wives. They changed religions and political parties. They moved across the country or the world-even changed nationalities. Why was gender the one sacred thing we weren't supposed to change? Who made that rule? (Wittlinger, 152)).

The real trial for a transgender starts after discovering their sexual identity because family, society and culture feel disgraced and ostracize them. If we scrutinize within the patriarchal sphere the main reason for their mistreatment is because of adopting female identity and nothing else. Women are considered to be the lowest creature and any male embracing woman's identity is not a prideful moment rather an ignominy. Besides, in Indian context a family gets exclusive rights if a boy child is born instead of a girl. The notion of the girl child is thought to be a burden because of various issues like preserving her chastity until she is getting married, dowry problem, providing training in doing household chores etc. Whereas, boy is considered as a boon because there is this pervasive belief, it is a son who will look after the parents, lead their family prestige, customs and traditions to next level by bringing in a daughter-in-law and stays with his parents until their demise. Apart from this there is one more strong reason for Indian family to yearn for boy child that is the last rites of the parents should be done only by a son and a woman's relationship with her family will get automatically severed once she gets married. This mentality is one of the foremost reasons for not accepting transgender within the family and societal sphere.

For an individual to discover his identity as a transgender is not a cup of tea because this transformation is something which happens all of a sudden and he goes through tremendous complexities to apprehend what all this transformation signifies as Revathi says,

I experienced a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness, which haunted me, day in and day out. A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be?

Would the world accept me thus?I wondered why God had chosen to inflict this peculiar



torture on me, and why he could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. Why am I a flawed being, I wondered often (p. 15).

The psychological and physical changes caused by hormonal imbalance is not a trivial or momentary feeling, rather an irresistible impulse if not fulfilled will drive them crazy or even to death. All individual in this world is thriving to establish an identity and everyone is motivated to create one which determines respect and status in the materialistic world, but in the case of transgender and queer people it is vehemently opposed which spotlights the prejudiced and pretentious nature of society which favors gender-binary. Getting access to transgender identity is not a simple task as McBride points out, “There are few things more dangerous to a transgender woman than the risk of a straight man not totally comfortable in his sexuality or masculinity realizing he is attracted to her” (McBride, 126). It is not like if a male discovers his identity as transgender and immediately he starts living as a complete female by wearing saree and doing female things rather only when he undergoes an operation he will be accepted as a transgender. The operation that is the removal of male sex organ is considered to be the licentiate of transgender as she says, “Only if I went to Mumbai and Delhi and stayed for years with those who wore saris and had undergone ‘operation’, could I hope to become one” (p. 19).

It is easy to walk on the trodden path, but it takes great courage and will power to take an untrodden path the life of transgender is like walking on an untracked road. Gender binary don't spend time in understanding their traumas and suffering, but takes great pride in discouraging and ridiculing their gender identity by belittling them with nicknames like “Girl-boy! Ali! Number 9!” (p. 6) in doing so there are demeaning themselves and showcasing disrespect to the creator. Transgender don't want pity or sympathy rather they yearn for respect and dignity. Showing indifference against transgender by patriarchal society also testifies their deep-rooted hatred for woman as Julia points out,

When the majority of jokes made at the expense of Trans people center on “men wearing dresses” or “men who want their penises cut off” that is not transphobia- it is trans-misogyny.

When the majority of sexual violence and sexual assaults omitted against Trans people is directed at trans-women that is not transphobia- it is trans-misogyny (Julia, 31).

It is high time to empathize transgender plight and provide them aiding hand. Life is all about helping a fellow being and living peacefully. To promote humanity and to get justice for transgender it is



significant to demonstrate our love for all people irrespective of caste, color, creed, religion, gender, community, ethnicity, etc. by understanding that the concept of gender is not a fixed entity rather a spectrum. A difference can be brought in the society only through genuine acceptance of everyone the way they are and this small change in attitude is capable of rendering goodness to a great number of people.

Intricate Patterns of Trans Culture

Like every other culture transgender community has a rich and complex traditions and cultural practices. The fulcrum notion of transgender culture is togetherness from which all other practices are woven. They worship a goddess called 'Pothiraja Matha', saree clad woman with weapons seated on a cock who symbolizes both valor and benevolence. Before starting their day or doing anything auspicious like undergoing 'nirvana' they have this practice of praying to goddess Matha to come to their aid and well-being. The clan of transgender includes a wide range of relationships like mother, daughter, great-grandmother, great-granddaughter, etc. as she points out, "Badudaadi (great-grandmother's guru), Daadaguru (great-grandmother), Nanaguru (grandmother), Guru (mother), Kaalaguru (guru's sister), Gurubai (my sister), Chela (daughter), Naathi-chela (granddaughter), Chandichela (great-granddaughter and Sadakchela (great-granddaughter's daughter)" (p. 64).

Transgender will completely transform into a woman and get many other privileges within their own community only after undergoing 'nirvanam'. The practice of nirvanam is not something which a transgender can undergo on her own, rather it is her guru who should give her consent and money to undergo the operation of nirvana. Getting an access to the transgender community is a big ritual practice. After discovering the femaleness in them if a transgender decides to live her life as a transgender they should approach another transgender who accepts to adopt them as their daughter in a meeting called jammatt where money would be offered to the elders and declared so and so as daughter and mother.

To sustain the identity as a transgender one has to abide the rules of the transgender community like saying paampaduthi (greeting) when seeing elders, not letting one's clothes brush against elders, always wearing bangles, earrings, nose-ring, anklets, should not cut hair, remove facial hair not by shaving but by plucking method, sharing everyday earnings with guru, doing all chores that elders ask to do etc. If a transgender doesn't follow all these rules then she will not have any place amidst transgender. This



illustrates the ruling structure of trans-matriarchy dominance in the trans-community. The eye-catching concept of trans-community is that there are no caste and religious difference rather only clans or houses as she says, “There are seven clans...Hijras can choose their guru from any house and sometimes shift their allegiance to another house” (p. 62). Transgender main occupations are asking for money from shopkeepers by blessing and praying good day for them and babaadi that is singing and dancing in a wedding and child naming ceremony. Apart from this mostly transgender engage in the job of sex work as she says, “It seems like there is nothing for us hijras to do but sex work. We lack the education to do much else, and there’s no one to offer us work” (p. 240) whereas, a transgender who is involved in babaadi won’t do sex work. Some trans-community forbids transgender from seeking a husband which they deem as a shameful act. Revathi always yearns to have a respectable job apart from the one which transgender are doing. Finally, she comes to know about an organization for queer people named ‘Sangama’ and desperately yearns to get a job in order to help people like her. Another reason for her to become a member of sangama is that she desires to be “like other women- go the work, do something for society’ (p. 241). This illustrates the hierarchical dominance within the transgender community and how like everyone transgender too have dreams and aspirations, but they are not given opportunities like the gender-binary to prove their talent.

Conclusion

Though society has undergone a lot of transformation in all aspects in case of gender humanity still remains as a conservative. This testifies the categorization of non-gender binary as the other. Transgender ask for basic rights which every individual own in a democratic country and acceptance of their identity as a woman. But what they receive is only degradation and humiliation. At some point society deliberately turns a blind eye to their existence by denying them driving license, place to stay, property on their name, ration card etc. To put a full stop to transgender issues it is important to raise awareness about gender-sensitization, which is a one step process to establish a gender-egalitarian society. Getting justice to transgender is not only their victory rather the triumph of the entire humanity. Gender often categorized as a sensitive topic has been the reason to ascribe powerful space to determine the role of power politics. Besides, lack of knowledge about gender construction is the root cause of



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unwanted problems and sufferings of innocent trans-community. It is high time to end prejudices about transgender thereby voicing for their rights and role in the contemporary society.

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