

# Reclaiming Identity at the Margin: A Study of Laxminarayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*

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Marginalization has posed innumerable unanswered questions to the peripheralised sections of society for which answers are not forthcoming; probably the most relevant and pressing question is that of identity assertion. Peripheralisation or marginalization refers to deliberately keeping a person in an undesirable social position where the individual is denied basic economic, social, political and cultural rights, thereby resulting in his/her social exclusion. Marginalized groups comprise the poor, working children, victims of gender inequality, the disabled, persons of ethnic minorities and the differently sexed. The basic issue of one's identity being at variance with that of the larger part makes it very difficult for an individual to lead a meaningful life. The topic of identity is very pertinent for most of the socially alienated and marginalized groups but it becomes very crucial for the sexually diverse communities of the LGBT clan. The LGBT is an umbrella term that includes the following classes- lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender: lesbians are women who are sexually attracted to women, gays are men who enjoy sex with men, bisexual refers to those who are equally happy with male as well as female sexual partners, and transgender, the last category of the LGBT community, encompasses the transgender, the transvestite and the transsexual. While transgender alludes to those who desire to acquire and perform the gender roles of the opposite sex, transvestite signifies those who cross-dress for sexual gratification and the last category, that of transsexuals, being aware of a mismatch in their body and mind regarding their sex/gender, strive to become members of the opposite sex through medical treatment including sex reassignment surgery and/or hormonal therapy. While the majority of society follows the gender binary norm, little consideration is given to those who are other-sexed individuals and are rather slightly termed *queer*. Trans phobia, the irrational fear and dislike of trans persons, is rampant in society since the predominantly heterosexual individuals fail to acknowledge and accept the differently- sexed persons. Most transgender narratives focus on the complications faced by the individuals especially with regard to the expression of their innate identity and the insensitive attitude of society. Laxminarayan Tripathi's autobiographical work *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, originally written in Marathi and later translated into English, announces her pride at her identity as a transgender or *hijra*, the term used

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for transgender in India. The title of the book proclaims her hijra identity as being more important than her name. The narrative commences with an account of childhood; Laxminarayan Tripathi was fondly called Raju by family and friends; however he felt there was a feminine side to his identity but he could not understand or explain it. His curiosity regarding his identity could not be shared with others as he could not admit that he was attracted to men.

In his childhood Laxminarayan was afflicted with typhoid, malaria and pneumonia apart from asthma. At a family function he was raped by a distant relative and later often subjected to sexual abuse by him and his friends. It may be conjectured that Laxmi's feminine body may have attracted boys to him. Anyway these sexual violences against Laxmi resulted in his leading a life of seclusion, unable to play with other children. It took a lot of suffering and many sexual attacks to finally embolden him to stop the sexual advances of his abusers. As Laxmi failed to recognize his true identity, he could not elucidate his attraction to males nor could he share it with others. He often sought the help of an older woman, Sangeeta, to help him with elocution contests at school; gradually he mustered courage to share his strange identity crisis with her.

The latter mentioned Ashok Row Kavi's name with the suggestion that Laxmi go and meet him. On meeting Ashok, Laxmi was relieved to know that there were others like him and he was convinced that he was also a homosexual like them. At school, Laxmi's penchant for dance was recognized by his teacher and he often found himself in stage performances. However his passion for dance was not encouraged or appreciated by others; he was often ridiculed as *chakka*, a derogatory term for hijra or eunuch. He improved his dance through Baby Johny's dance classes and when he was in the eighth standard, he started his own dance class. It was after meeting a friend's brother, a hijra, that Laxmi finally discerned her true identity; the former taught her the life, history and traditions of the hijra community. In 1998 Laxmi underwent the *reet* ceremony and became a hijra officially; Lata Nayak was the guru and Laxmi her chela; Laxmi, however chose to keep the fact secret from her parents.

Laxmi's acceptance of her hijra identity brought out the activist in her; she worked for the welfare of the prostitutes in Mumbai. She also became an active spokesperson for the hijra community. Through her close contact with hijras in Mumbai, Laxmi got opportunities to make presentations about their condition at various government meetings; the fact that she was a graduate helped. In the meanwhile, Laxmi had started dancing in a bar as it was lucrative: when the government shut down all dance bars, she also joined the agitators. In spite of a favorable judgment from the Mumbai High Court, the Maharashtra government refused to reopen the dance bars.

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Laxmi then acted in a film about hijras titled *Between the Lines* by a German journalist and Indologist which won the former much appreciation. Her guru insisted that she should live with her it is customary within the hijra community but Laxmi was content and happy to live with her parents who had accepted her hijra identity, albeit reluctantly. Her guru refused her permission to attend the round table conference on the status of HIV and AIDS in India to be held at Mumbai; Laxmi was keen to attend it since the then General Secretary of U N, Kofi Anan was to be the chief guest. Laxmi did attend the meeting and whenever Lata Guru dissuaded her from participating in functions, she obstinately went ahead with her decision. It was the first time a transgender from India was attending the 16<sup>th</sup> World AIDS Conference at Toronto and in order to participate she had to get her passport. The hurdles and official apathy she faced to acquire a passport reveals the narrow mindedness of society as well as their ignorance about the transgender clan. Laxmi was compelled to explain her hijra identity to the clerks at the ration shop but their inability to comprehend her identity coupled with their uncooperative behaviour appalled her.

Laxmi's activism often took her abroad on many occasions; she visited Amsterdam many times and also Bangkok and New York. Her overseas travel introduced her to various transpersons including Kate Borsten and Stephen Whittle, and Andrew Hunter who works for the transgender community in Thailand. Laxmi's success in reclaiming her identity helped her to become a complete person apart from contributing to her community. She achieved fame by participating in television programmes like *Boogie Woogie*, *Dus Ka Dum*, *Sach ka Saamna* and *Big Boss*. Laxmi also organized a beauty contest for hijras which was the first of its kind in India. In spite of her celebrity status, Laxmi was once insulted and forced to leave a party due to her hijra identity.

Laxmi admits that mainstream society is curious to know about the transgender but most of the latter refuse to divulge the secrets of their lives. Society members think that hijras are involved in begging or sex work; in the courts of the old Muslim kings however, hijras were an integral part and looked upon with reverence. Traditionally hijras sang, danced and performed badhai during weddings and at the birth of a child but these are hardly sufficient to sustain one's life in the present age. Because they face discrimination at schools, most hijras are denied education and unable to take up professions, thereby compelling them to take up sex work or dance in bars. Laxmi mentions that in their contemporary world, many transgender are getting educated and take up respectable jobs: she also managed to acquire education and reclaim her identity. In spite of her bold decision to come out as a transgender, Laxmi refused to obey all the rules imposed by the hijra community. She often transgressed against the regulations of the

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community but she justifies her actions as her overseas travel and press interviews only helped her to become a complete person and live life on her terms. Laxmi also succeeded in highlighting the tribulations of the transgender; she founded the Maharashtra Trutiya Panthi Sanghatana and through tireless efforts managed to sensitize the government to include the transgender in their special policy for women.

A critical investigation of *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* reveals that Judith Butler's revolutionary ideas on gender identity mentioned in *Gender Trouble* are proved true in the case of Laxmi as also her opinion of gender being performative. Throughout *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* one can find Laxmi talking at length about her feminine characteristics including her passion for dance, love for clothes, jewellery and make up. Butler claims that everyday actions, speech utterances, gestures, dress codes and behaviour apart from some prohibitions come together to mould the *essential* masculine or feminine identity. She argues that gender is always performed and this performance of gender is wholly a social matter with identity manifested in performativity. Laxmi recognized her identity crisis, boldly reclaimed her distinct unique hijra personality and through her narrative tries to dispel some of the myths society harbours against the transgender. She elucidates that if a person's biological, psychological and sexual identities are incongruous, that individual is ostracized by society. Since such an individual is not supported by family and friends, he/she is obliged to join others similar to him/her. In order to assert one's identity, the person may be compelled to undergo surgery and hormone therapy to become the gender of one's psyche. Laxmi dwells at length to distinguish the hijra from the hermaphrodite. She also admits that both men and women in India are prejudiced against the hijras and think that they pester them for money. Laxmi legitimizes the actions of hijras explaining that they grow up with a sense of being wronged by Nature and try to right this wrong by venting it on the so called *normal* people.

Towards the end of her narrative, Laxmi presents the hierarchy of the typical hijra family; she clarifies the rules and regulations of the hijra family or *gharana* and the fines that may be levied in case of misdemeanor. The hijra clan has its own panchayat or court where cases of indiscipline are investigated and settlements are made. Different rituals and customs followed by the hijras are explained; hijras can get castrated even though it is not compulsory to do so. In her case Laxmi did not undergo castration. She also elaborates some of the rituals associated with the death of transgender. Many ancient stories and legends about transgender are also included in Laxmi's narrative. In recent times many transgender have taken up important roles in society; Laxmi mentions Shabnam Mausi who was an elected representative in Madhya Pradesh, Kamal Jan, the mayor of Katni and another mayor, Asha Devi. Through her work Laxmi strives to

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include the downtrodden and sidelined transgender and express how reclaiming one's identity is indispensable for fulfilling one's dreams and aspirations. In spite of being at the fringes of society Laxmi was successful in articulating herself and making others listen to her.

### Works Cited

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