

## **Voice of the Voiceless: A Perlustration of A. Revathi's**

### ***The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story***

**Dr.I.P. Remya**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

G.T.N Arts College

Dindigul

[remyavince@gmail.com](mailto:remyavince@gmail.com)

“One is not born a woman, one becomes one” (Beauvoir, 283). Simone de Beauvoir in the work *The Second Sex* evidently indicates that womanhood is something which is accomplished by a woman rather than something inherited. His composition singularizes gender from sex, indicating that, gender is a countenance of gently acquired identity. If Sex is a biological trait, Gender is a cultural and psychological facet. The driving force behind gender inequality is the social stratification. Sexual difference, as well as social structure of gender, is an integral part of Gender Identity. The third gender is always ignored, alienated and offended. The social consonance of gender specifically in Indian society is confined to male or female. The third gender is not yet included in the core of the main stream society. Virtually everyone in the society watches a transgender from the standpoint of belligerent beggars and prostitutes, but their life of darkness is barely noticeable. The rancorous environment they reside and the conditions of the trauma they undergo are abounding in endless fear and anxiety when they confront their real selves and individuality. In such combative circumstances, only a few transgenders moved to measure the ladder of success. They stood hard and persistent whenever they were rejected and humiliated.

A. Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* unfolds the struggle, a hijra faces in recognizing and maintaining her true perception amidst the so called heterosexual men and women. By describing the violence, isolation, and discrimination that they face today in the context of the racial hippie's sociocultural context, this paper attempts to voice the suffering, which is an integral part of a hijra's life.

“Transgender” is a term derived from the Latin word “Transgenre”. This is an extensive term pertained to an array of personage, whose gender identity does not match with their biological sex. Transgender is the state of one's identity that does not go with one's “assigned sex”. Indeed, the term “Transgender” gained much attention in 1970s. It outlined those people who wanted to live as cross-gender without shifts. In 1980s, it was amplified to an umbrella term that embraced all those who did not concur with the gender identity defined at birth.

As a land of ethnic diversity, India hosts disparate cultures and dogmas. Transgenders had an enduring place in the bygone days of India. Transgenders are called from different parts of the country under different names. They are known as Hijras, Tirunangais, Khoja, Eunuchs, Aravanis, etc. They appeared to be a part of Indian community for centuries. In times past, ‘Hijras’ were idolized and cherished in Indian culture. “Hijra” is a term applied for physiological male who adopts a feminine gender identity, women’s clothing and other feminine gender roles. Their entity can be traced back to the mythological texts of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. With the advent of the British, the fate of an Indian transgender changed. They are one of the victims of colonialism. They were deprived of all the benefits they had enjoyed before.

They were to be, it is believed, handled apathetically and the incessant mockery of their physique and habits led to psychological trauma. Casually the public passes assorted downgrade remarks and even their own family condemns them. The so-called society considered the individuals that come under the frame work of male or female as customary and anything other than that is considered to be anomalous or sub human, which means not even complete human. The present condition of Indian transgenders are very much pathetic. In India, the hijra community is ignored geographically, socially and economically. Hijras find it strenuous to get employment and rarely find official recognition in their feminine identity.

Transgender studies provide a multidisciplinary approach to gender studies by examining the intersections of sex and gender as related to cultural expression, life experience, and political movements. *Trans* identity is one of the most written themes of the second half of the twentieth century. The story of *Trans* sexuality is an extended history of altering societies and attitudes restrained against the trans person’s individual position within the society. However the term “transgender” has emerged over the past few decades, trans sexualism has emerged as a field of scholarly inquiry only recently. The main purpose of transgender research is to endow with experience that will provide useful knowledge to transgender people and communities.

This paper highlights the agony which is always the part of a hijra’s life. It places hijras against the socio-cultural backdrop of India to shed light on the exclusion, violence and discrimination that they come across during the day in a socio-cultural environment. Still, after facing so much back thrash, many transgenders emerged from the ashes and raised their voice for their rights. Vidya, Priya Babu, Revathi, Kalki and a few more caricatured their problems in the society through their writings and also shed light on the human beings.

Revathi, a transgender writer and social activist, who is a part of an NGO Sangama, fights for the civil rights of the transgenders. She is from Namakkal, a township in Tamilnadu, from where she moved to Delhi and Mumbai to revolutionize her gender and now settled in Bengaluru. Her first book, *Unarvum Uruvamum (Feelings of the Entire Body)* in 2004 chronicled her line of field studies with hijras in the majesty of Tamil Nadu. It is a collection of authentic stories of the people belonging to the Hijra community in South India. *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, is her second paperback and her autobiography. It was written in Tamil and was translated by V. Geetha in the year 2010. According to Revathi, she initially released the book in English and not in Tamil to save herself from the rage of her family. Finally, in 2011, the book was published in Tamil as *Vellai Mozhi*. *The Truth About Me* is an intrepidly brave and moving autobiography of a hijra who fought ridicule, harrying, and violence equally in her homewards and outside to recover her days of dignity.

Revathi was a boy by birth but felt like a girl. In telling her life story, Revathi evokes her deep uneasiness of being in the wrong body that she had suffered since childhood. She fled to Delhi to escape constant violence in her family and community and joined a house of hijras. Her life became an amazing run of extremely menacing physical and psychological journeys to grow to be a woman and to find love. The smirch of being a hijra commences from the family itself. Right from the early days of childhood, the family and friends fail to accept them as they are. The community in which Doraisamy (Revathi) was born is a very traditional one and it gives much importance to its social status. For them, an individual is a social being than a single entity. They placed individuality as secondary to social approval.

Doraisamy spent most of his childhood days with uneasiness when he tried to negotiate his body in harmony with his inner desires and innate talents. At times, he got punishment for his femininity. He fled to join the hijra community in Dindigul as he had long failed to prevent him from expressing his innate feelings. After his brother learned of his friendship with other hijras, he was subjected to more torture:

He beat me hard mindlessly, yelling that he wanted to kill me, I who had dared to run away. I tried to protect my face and head with my hands to keep the blows from falling. But nevertheless they came down hard, and I felt my hands swell. I was beaten on my legs, on my back, and finally, my brother brought the bat down heavily on my head. My skull cracked and there was blood all over, flowing, warm. 'That's right. Beat him and break his bones. Only then will he stay at home and not run away,' I hear my mother say. (Revathi 55)

In a family where every mistake is punished by physical violence, his problems are not just about acceptance but also his own safety.

The hijras experience discrimination at every stage of their life. Torture becomes a habit for them, and their strong need for justice is limited to the normative discourse about gender. They remain a unique category and their life is characterized by isolation, violence, and discrimination. Education is the basis of the progress and economic status of people and society. This not only makes a person fit for work but also increases self-confidence. Hijras school memories mostly constitute of insults, offenses, and exploitation. The transgender writer and activist Vidya had to face all such offenses in her school days which she clearly portrayed in her autobiography, *I Am Vidya* :

My effeminate ways hitherto an object to ridicule on my street now became the target of my schoolmates' taunts. Even kids from lower classes teased me at school. 'Look at this lady', they shouted after me. It became quite common for the boys to tease me. I was still a bright student, but I was lonely kid through high school. The problem affecting my studies. (Vidya 31)

Revathi is not even an exception. She found it difficult to manage her school days as she was regularly criticized for her feminine behavior and for being with other girls in the class. The atmosphere was undesirable. Her sports teacher once punished her for her girlish behaviour. He was also caned for not being 'brave like a boy' and for not playing boys' game, "I got punished by the PT teacher too. He would box my ears and yell, 'Are you a girl or what? Pull your trousers down, let me check.' He would make as if he was going to strip me and I would start crying. The other boys laughed at this". (Revathi 7) The right to education, for many in India, is a forbidden one and the situation is even darker for the third gender.

Social barring marks every moment of hijra's life. The society evades the very existence of the transgenders and has slammed the gates of employment that thrust into the grasp of penury and their existence itself becomes a question. They have no other option than to turn towards prostitution. Prostitution remains the only fate for most of the hijras. It's not a pleasure occupation; but its more of a traumatic experience, "I had not chosen sex work in order to make money. It was because I could not really repress my sexual feelings that I had opted for this life. I was beginning to discover the horror and violence of this choice" (Revathi 110).

In addition to the exploitation, there is also competition in the profession. "Only those hijras who looked like women were allowed to do sex work" (Revathi 131). Police exploitation is a

terrible joke in the hijras lives. For Revathi, police is not different from the cruel rowdies. They are the two sides of a same coin, “The police took bribes from us all the time” (*Revathi* 210). Revathi also adds:

I screamed that I did not want to go into the cell. I fell at policeman’s feet. He kicked me with his boots. He then asked me to take my clothes off- right there, while the prisoner was watching. I pleaded with him and wept, but he forcibly stripped me. When I was standing naked, he stuck his lathi where I’d had my operation and demanded that I stand with my legs apart, like a woman would. He repeatedly struck at that part with his lathi and said, ‘so, can it go in there? Or is it a field one can’t enter? How do you have sex then?’ I felt heart-broken and could not speak. (*Revathi* 206)

Hijras are always gaped at the queerness of the society. For a hijra, they are always followed by the gaze of men and women wherever they go. As far as they are concerned, they always receive unwelcomed attention. Throughout their life, they experience a sense of duality. Outwardly they have the appearance of a man, but originally a woman by inside. They always yearn for love and brooding over it. The institution of marriage contributes even more to the predicament of hijras. “I expected what all women expect from their husbands... I gave him all my love and expected him to reciprocate at least to an extent” (*Revathi* 286). The notion of a caring spouse turns out to be an offensive, apathetic and repressive partner in most of the cases. The same applies to Revathi. She laments saying, “He seemed to have lost all desire for me” (*Revathi* 287).

Despite all the guarantees of constitution, the hijras are denied their fundamental rights such as right to live, right to education, freedom of expression, right to personal liberty and dignity, right to discrimination and violence etc. They strive to satiate even their very fundamental requirements. For them, living in a world that only recognizes male and female is always a tedious task. Revathi believes that its always a struggle to live the life of a hijra, beginning with choosing which bathroom to use. Even after the acceptance of ‘third gender’ by the Supreme Court, most of India’s public toilets failed to accommodate them. Revathi was rejected as a ‘potter’ as she tried to use the women’s toilet. At last she was compelled to lie that she was a guy dressed up as a lady for a show to get through the scenario. Lacking an identity, her only option was to resort unwillingly to someone else's identity. Although, trans enjoy more acceptance these days, there are a lot of arenas that still ban their entry:

I returned to the bus stand and decided to go to the women’s toilet there. But the man who stood there to receive money for the pay-and-use toilets dismissed me as a pottai

and would not let me in. when I tried to get into the men's toilet section, I was shooed away from there as well. Finally, I told the man who stood in front of the men's toilets...that I was a man and had dressed up as a woman for a show...he let me in...Startled, the men who were peeing in there started yelling. I muttered, 'I'm a man too'. (Revathy 54)

Through her autobiography, A. Revathi unveils the hidden and unprecedented episodes in hijra's life. The Right for Transgender Persons Bill (2014) took away the archaic section 377, supposedly secure the conservation of trans rights. Despite enforcing legislation on trans rights, its execution still remains a question. It is time to switch the prime focus through which Indian society sees transgenders as a whole, especially hijras. It is the responsibility of a society to make the structure of primitive thinking, a binary". The society should crack itself free from the austere binary system which supports intolerance against hijras, who have been suffering for so long.

### Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Bantam Books, 1953. Print.
- Bertens, Hans. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. Third Edition. New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Revathi, A. *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. Trans. V. Geetha. India: Penguin, 2010. Print.
- Vidya, Living Smile. *I Am Vidya*. Trans.V.Ramnarayan. Chennai: Oxygen Books, 2007. Print.
- <https://coolingpearls.wordpress.com/2010/11/17/the-truth-about-me-a-hijra-life-story-by-a-revathi/>