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## Heteronormativity and Social Stigma: A Hijra Life Story

By Dimple M. Scaria & Dr. R. Jinu

**Abstract-** Transgender people are those who have a gender identity or gender expression that is at variance from their perceived sex. Being transgender is autonomous of sexual orientation. The degree to which the individual feels real, authentic and at ease with their outward manifestation and acknowledge their actual identity has been called transgender congruence. Most transgender people are prejudiced in their place of work and denied access to public spaces and healthcare. In many places, they do not even get any legal remedy against prejudice and intolerance. This paper is an attempt to deconstruct heteronormative default paradigms on sexuality and sexual orientation. It also looks into the practice and consequence of how this reign of heteronormativity hijacks and distorts the life of transgender people in India. A. Revathi's life narrative, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* is a good case in point. This narrative evidently illustrates the ways in which a typical heteronormative, prescriptive as well as patriarchal society enforces restrictions on the sartorial, vocational and economic proclivities of a set of people called hijras. It is a painful account of distress and disappointment, but the goal is not to solicit commiseration or favours from society or administration; on the contrary, to carve out a little space for this particular group in the gender firmament, thereby informing the world that they too want to lead a life!.

**Keywords:** *hijra, gender, heteronormative, discrimination.*

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# Heteronormativity and Social Stigma: A Hijra Life Story

Dimple M. Scaria <sup>α</sup> & Dr. R. Jinu <sup>σ</sup>

**Abstract-** Transgender people are those who have a gender identity or gender expression that is at variance from their perceived sex. Being transgender is autonomous of sexual orientation. The degree to which the individual feels real, authentic and at ease with their outward manifestation and acknowledge their actual identity has been called transgender congruence. Most transgender people are prejudiced in their place of work and denied access to public spaces and healthcare. In many places, they do not even get any legal remedy against prejudice and intolerance. This paper is an attempt to deconstruct heteronormative default paradigms on sexuality and sexual orientation. It also looks into the practice and consequence of how this reign of heteronormativity hijacks and distorts the life of transgender people in India. A. Revathi's life narrative, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* is a good case in point. This narrative evidently illustrates the ways in which a typical heteronormative, prescriptive as well as patriarchal society enforces restrictions on the sartorial, vocational and economic proclivities of a set of people called hijras. It is a painful account of distress and disappointment, but the goal is not to solicit commiseration or favours from society or administration; on the contrary, to carve out a little space for this particular group in the gender firmament, thereby informing the world that they too want to lead a life!

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In a country where we frequently speak the language of rights aloud, many are often seen deprived of their rights in terms of gender, sexuality, caste, and religion. One has to either strike a compromise or wage a struggle. This paper attempts to examine the multifaceted course of discrimination coupled with bias and bigotry focusing upon the painful experience of A. Revathi. Her life narrative is a categorical expression of her anguished and distressed self.

## II. DISCUSSION

At the outset of her book Revathi pronounces in unequivocal terms the objective behind her life narrative. Through her book she makes a passionate appeal for a change in the public consciousness. As a distressing and heart-rending account of discrimination and ridicule,

this life narrative points to the lives of sexual minorities. It speaks volumes about how the dismissal, disgrace and disapproval in a hyper-normative patriarchal community make the life of a transgender woman despicable. Revathi laments:

But who gives people like me love? Or respect? Who offers us clothes to hide our shame? When I am hungry who feeds me? If I want all of this, what am I to do? Did I come with a mission at birth, wanting to be a pottai? Did my parents imagine I would be one, when I was born? I did not imagine that I would walk endlessly on several roads, begging, doing sex work. Who is responsible for what has happened to me? (Revathi, p.220)

Born as a male child to parents of an ordinary family in Salem district of Tamil Nadu, Revathi's sexual identity was torn between that of a male and a female. Named as Doraiswamy, the child was ill-treated and humiliated for his so-called feminine mannerisms. Right from the childhood Doraiswamy preferred to be in the company of girls and was often seen clad in the female dress. A ridiculous sense of uneasiness in the wrong body was intensely felt throughout his childhood. He often felt troubled by the feelings that men stirred up in him. Whenever he saw a young man, he felt incredibly shy. He was so timid that he lowered his head at the very sight of young men. Doraiswamy experienced enormous emotional agony and embarrassment over his gender identity. He often wondered why he should not be drawn to women instead of men. He doubted whether he had been mad enough to love men, and also, whether there were others like him elsewhere in the world. Doraiswamy lived with these apprehensions and doubts which lay covered deep inside him. He experienced an increasing sense of unrestricted femininity which could obsess him incessantly. He felt as if he is ensnared in a man's body with a woman's mindscape.

However, Doraiswamy's decision to flee from his village brought about a drastic change in his life. He developed a sense of affinity towards the Kothi community and decided to undergo the sex reassignment surgical procedure. Thus Doraiswamy was renamed as Revathi by her guru and led her life in Delhi with the Hijra community. Despite her sex determinism, she had to endure corporal and sexual violence along with economic deprivation. She had to take up quite a few odd jobs to stay alive including

**Author α:** Research Scholar, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India.  
e-mail: dimplescaria34@gmail.com

**Author σ:** Assistant Professor, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, India.  
e-mail: jichelnu@gmail.com

dancing at weddings, begging and sex-work. After a few months, exhausted of her life in Delhi, she ran away for home only to be dismissed by her near ones! She faced derisions and abuses but showed an incredible reluctance to give in. Revathi wondered whether she should stay back in her village. She came to understand that families would accept a person like her only if she had money, looked modern and wore costly clothes and ornaments.

Consequently, she moved to Bangalore with her survival instinct. There, after a short stint in the profession of a sex worker, Revathi managed to work with *Sangama*, an NGO working exclusively for the rights of the sexual minorities. The fact that she was prompt and punctilious endeared her to all the staff in *Sangama*. The seminars, workshops, film screenings and public meetings organized at *Sangama* provided her with much exposure to the life of sexual minorities. Revathi was very keen to participate in such programmes and she could even provide first hand information on transgender culture, their life, and the discrimination and humiliation meted out to this fringe class. She also spoke about the property rights of transgenders and the problems encountered by someone like her who had opted for a gender reassignment surgery. As a spokesperson of transgender community, Revathi was thoroughly conscious of their problems and shortcomings and also worked in tandem with those involved in other human rights activities. She tried to convince the community members who were stricken with fear and suspicion and tried to make them understand their predicament:

In the early days of my work, hijras would tell me, 'You've got a job and a salary that goes with it. You are brave. But us? We don't have jobs; we have to do sex work to feed ourselves. It is easy for you to say 'come to a meeting', 'come to our office', 'come to this programme'. . . But if we come, will you give us money? Give us food to eat? If we come for a day, then we lose a day's work. If we go to a few shops, we'll at least earn something. (Revathi, p. 247)

In her attempt to break up the 'other' image of a hijra, Revathi makes an earnest appeal for the transformation in the mindset of the hijra community itself. Meanwhile *Sangama* grew as an organization when more and more people joined with them to raise their voice in favour of sexual minorities. Initially Revathi and her *chelas* were in the front among those who identified themselves as hijras and proclaimed their sexual rights. It took a few years for them to clarify *Sangama*'s work to the rest of their community. At first nobody could make out what they were doing. They were reticent and seldom came forward to extend their understanding. Fear and suspicion lurked behind hijras.

It is quite strange that the organization like *Sangama* which champions the cause of sexual

minorities and affirms solidarity with the downtrodden, proved inadequate at times to hang on to its ideology. Revathi's live-in- relationship with one of her senior colleagues of *Sangama* could not alleviate the angst of a hijra:

I had to do all the chores and make sure the bills were paid; that the household help was paid, etc. He did not have any time to do things around the house. Even if I were to accept all that work as my responsibility, there was his behaviour at night. He was less romantic and he did not speak as affectionately as before. I expected what all women expected from their husbands, but suffered because I could not bring myself to ask for it. I gave him all my love, and expected him to reciprocate at least to an extent. But once he sat at the computer, he tended to forget the whole world. I kept my desires locked inside myself, while I hurt all the while. (Revathi, p.286)

Heteronormative patriarchal society is diplomatic enough in preserving its hierarchic gender identity. The accent on the distinctiveness of masculine and feminine garments as two different water tight compartments throws much light on the ingenious as well as the artful scheme of an authoritarian prescriptive society to sabotage the claims and desires of a less privileged section of society. The third category per se who is forced to fit into any of these two standardized gender moulds, falls an easy victim to a powerful obligatory capitulation and an inevitable categorization. This speaks much about their colonized situation in terms of clothes and costumes.

A. Revathi's life narrative is not just a passionate expression of grief over a deplorable life, rather it calls for a transformative resonance in the psyche of those cultural colonialists who are absolutely unaware and misled of hijras physical-build and sexual orientation:

Since people are not even aware of our existence, they think ill of us. It is our duty to dispel such ignorance . . . People were moved by my testimony when I wrote about it or spoke in public. Sometimes I felt a glow of pride. I had wanted to study, get a degree and go to work, like other people. Of course, none of that happened. But today, I was going to various colleges and universities to conduct classes for students on sexuality, identity and culture. I was speaking up for my community, doing workshops for hijras, conscientizing doctors. I was able to respond to questions and clarify doubts. There were so many things that I could be proud of, but I felt that this was about more than an individual hijra's success- it was a matter of pride for all hijras. (Revathi, p. 246)

Although the Indian demographic census did a commendable task by recognizing transgenders as a third category as distinct from the male and the female, their existence is still perceived with derision. The

expression 'other' as used in the official registers and documents of the administration to specify gender also connotes the attitude of some cultural vigilantes giving rise to multiple significations! A primitive fear of monstrosity and barbarianism is often connected with this fringe class of our society eclipsing their legal and constitutional rights. In their laboured endeavour to carve out a niche in the gender firmament, the transgenders deconstruct the binary gender coordinates of male and female as the first and the second gender respectively. They do not wish themselves to be identified as the third gender and prefer to remain as an independent gender category. They repudiate the concept of the 'third' gender and problematize the dual postulates of first and second gender.

### III. CONCLUSION

In India the transgenders are entangled in a vicious circle of sartorial, vocational and economic hegemony. They are denied opportunity to take part in any productive economic output and are viewed as an object of ridicule. And it is the same society that blames them for leading a scrounging life! The social blot imprinted on the transgenders is so stigmatized that they have to go a long way to prop up an economic self-determination. An indelible societal impression on transgenders as 'other' and uncouth turns out to be a real impediment on their path of dignified social life. And A. Revathi through her life narrative valiantly endeavours to confront and deconstruct the prescriptive as well as the deterministic values of a patriarchal system.

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