



Forced Gender Performance Traced in the Novel *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*

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Abstract -

Gender roles play a very significant role in society. This paper aims to study the gender role of Doraisamy/Revathi as a trans character. To achieve this aim, we will study the text *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi and analyze the character of Revathi. The paper will discuss how social and cultural norms force an individual to follow stereotypical gender roles and fit in the gender binary system. Transgender identity is still a taboo issue in society. The paper will analyze the views of feminists and trans feminists to support the point of forced gender performance found in transgenders. Some feminists and queer theorists like Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Andrea Dworkin argue for a trans-inclusive society and stand for the rights of transgender. The paper will also discuss the difference between the sex and gender of a person.

Keywords - Transgender, Gender discrimination, Feminist, and Trans feminist.

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Introduction -

Transgenders are commonly known as the 'third gender', there are around 4.86 lacs of transgender people residing in India. Today, in the 21st century, this community faces the issue of gender discrimination, marginalization, negligence, and mental torture from society. The novel *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* is an autobiographical novel written by a transgender A. Revathi on her plight of being transgender. She has penned down her autobiographical experience through this masterpiece and represented the hardships and struggles of her life. She was forced to perform the role of a male right from her childhood to satisfy the norms made by society. Through the character of Revathi, we can relate to the struggles of transgender to gain their gender identity in society. The life journey of Revathi starts from her own home to the doors of society in the hunt for her gender acceptance. As a trans rights activist, today Revathi calls out for equal rights for transgender. Revathi as Doraisamy was expected to follow the stereotypical standards

of male attributes.

Sex and Gender -

The concept of gender is generally based upon social and cultural norms driven by society. If a person is born with a female reproductive organ then her gender is female; while if a person has a male reproductive organ then his gender is male. In other words, gender is determined by the biological identity of a person. To argue for this representation of gender, it is witnessed by supporting the definition of gender as 'performative'. Bourdieu argues that the definition of gender has to revise in biology then only we can eradicate masculine dominance from society. According to him, 'when various parties contest whether one's sexual identity is natural or cultural, a border between matter and form, which is also a border between what is real and what is supplementary.' (51, Colebrook) The structure of gender is centered between maleness and femaleness; it questions the role of in-between individuals present in society. 'Regardless of modern, post-modern or postmodern

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approaches, something like a gender binary has been fundamental to Western thought.' (51, Colebrook) The existence of a gender binary structure is intrinsically rooted in our society, Revathi in her childhood has been intimated by the issue of the gender binary. Her mother always stopped him from doing household chores but as Doraisamy, he was so much interested in making kolams, sweeping, washing vessels, kitchen work, and cleaning the yards. He has developed an irrepressible feeling of wanting to become a woman. Revathi writes, 'In my kurathi's garb, I could express all those female feelings that I usually have to suppress and so felt happy for days afterwards.' (14, Revathi)

Role of Gender -

Revathi is a character who has suffered from a crisis of gender identity in her early childhood days. She has always suppressed her femaleness in a male body and tolerated all the fingers pointed towards her for her feminine mannerisms. Her brothers and sister along with her classmates always addressed her as girl-boy - "they would chant, 'Girl-boy!' 'Ali!' 'Number 9!' My heart would sink at these words..." (6, Revathi) Revathi's autobiography is a real experience of a transwoman and her feelings and sorrows are presented with deep pathos in it. The hetero-normative society will not understand the constant battle of struggle a transgender person has to go through in their life. 'Revathi who through her autobiography, for the first time, bravely attempts to challenge and break this cyclic process of gender colonization and heteronormative discourse.' (223, Samanta) Transgender woman is not allowed to use the lady's washroom nor they are admitted to a hospital in lady's ward. This is a major problem through this community has to deal with even today. Revathi states, '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.' (54, Revathi) Such kind of discrimination has been witnessed in a web series called *Patal Lok*, released on Amazon Prime in the year 2020. Cheeni, a Nepali trans character, accused criminals of being locked up with male criminals and has been mercilessly beaten up by male police officials. Thus, gender discrimination has been carried upon transgenders as well in various

levels of society.

The life of a transgender is full of agony and misery. They are forced to opt for a life that is unrespectful and disheartening. Revathi through these heartbreaking lines informs the readers about her daily hardships, she writes, 'But for people like me, to live was to struggle and fight.' (219, Revathi) One has to face the problems of poverty, lack of employment and education, mental torture, and gender discrimination. This is one of the reasons that the financial condition of Revathi was not so well. Earlier, she has to do begging in the streets of Delhi and ended up doing sex work in Mumbai. In earlier times, transgenders are not allowed to opt for a decent profession. Revathi has done sex work to earn some income and also, to satisfy her sexual wants. 'I started doing sex work with clients who fancied me... I earned around five hundred rupees. Now that I had sufficient money, I could make plans to leave.' (154, Revathi) Karl Marx in his Marxism theory focuses on the struggle between the labor class and the capitalist class. He opines, 'gender differences were explained according to the economic division of labour.' (128, Colebrook) Thus, we can reason that one of the governing factors which lead to gender discrimination towards the trans community is the lack of income and employment opportunities. The hijra community should not be blamed for choosing the occupation of sex work or begging to earn their bread. According to the study carried out by National Human Rights Commission, 'about 92 percent of transgenders are deprived of the right to participate in any form of economic activity in the country, with even qualified ones refused jobs.' (India Today Web Desk, 2020) The government is trying hard to change this narrative and figures; indeed it is a tough job to crack.

Moreover, another highlighting factor that affects the life of transgenders is the issue of sexual assault. The reason for such kind of crimes committed against transgenders is their gender identity. The heterosexual society does not tolerate the identity of transgenders who represented themselves as cisgender women. This led to the incidents like sexual assault, physical abuse, and mental torture directed the trans people. Shaikh writes, 'A much higher number faces sexual and physical violence,



which often goes unreported. Most often the violence is done by their own families and partners.’(Shaikh, 2020) Revathi too has faced such kind of miserable situation in her lifetime; her brother and family have tortured her and beaten her for being transgender. She writes, ‘He beat me hard mindlessly, yelling that he wanted to kill me, I who had dared to run away... 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’ (Revathi, 55). Therefore, the life a trans person chooses for themselves is full of tacks and splinters and there is no carpet placed on the floor. Revathi’s initial struggle is too full of difficulties and hardships; her road to leading a respectful life is full of bumps that are not easy to walk. Advocate Sunita writes, ‘Oppression by the police turned out to be one of the major concerns of the gay, bisexual and transgender people.’ (Sunita, 2021) The cops use dirty filthy language to address the transgender; they do not file legal FIR against the trans folks and illegally detained them. Once Revathi got arrested for carrying out sex work and she was taken into remand by the cops. She pens down that incident with so much grief and pain she has gone through. She asserts, ‘I fell at the policeman’s feet. He kicked me with his boots. He then asked me to take my clothes off - right there ... 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.’ (206, Revathi) Revathi was devastated after this incident and it had a painful impact on her mind, ‘I spent the entire night there, shivering in the cold,’ (207, Revathi)

Feminist Outlook -

We can observe a sense of inclusion for the trans identity in the feminist outlook. However, the first wave of feminism talks about equality and the rights of women and discusses the issues of gender hierarchy but the second-wave was changed its course of flow. Some liberal feminists raised their voices for the inclusion of transgenders in the fight against gender discrimination. Julia Kristeva, a key figure of french feminism, argues to establish a unified code for multiple sexual identities. According to Julia, ‘only a revolution in the very nature of experience will liberate us from the boundaries

of gender identity.’ (147, Colebrook) Kristeva opines that the male-female binary is metaphysical in nature. Queer theorist, Judith Butler distinguishes between sex and gender of a person; according to Butler, ‘sex is produced’. (173, Colebrook) She introspects the possibilities of gender and explains the distinction between the realities of performance and law.

Andrea Dworkin, a radical feminist, was a trans ally. She rejects the concept of gender polarity and social hierarchy; she strongly opposes male supremacy in society. Some radical feminists support the rights of transgender and urge society to accept trans people in mainstream society. While liberal feminism is much more accepting of transgender identity. This feminism liberates with the idea of queer theory, which sees gender as a separate identity and performative. Dworkin in her book *Woman Hating: A Radical Look at Sexuality* (1974) presents her views on the support of Sex Reassignment Surgery for transsexuals. She writes, ‘One, every transsexual has the right to survival on his/her own terms. That means that every transsexual is entitled to a sex-change operation, and it should be provided by the community as one of its functions.’ (Stoltenberg, 2020) According to her, if society accepts all three sexes under a single umbrella then there will be new modes of sexual identity. Eve Sedgwick in her work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) explains the difference between the terms sex and gender of a person and stressed the fact that heterosexuality is normalized due to the suppression of homosexuality. She writes:

"Sex" in this sense—what I'll demarcate as "chromosomal sex" —is seen as the relatively minimal raw material on which is then based the social construction of gender. Gender, then, is the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors...(27, Sedgwick)

Research Methodology -

This study has used primary sources as well as secondary sources for analyzing the text and other research articles to conduct this study. Also, qualitative data-based information has been used to study the current trend and past experiences related to the subject area.



Conclusion -

The life struggle of Revathi is full of pain, discrimination, and hardships. Social stigma is the root cause of poor health status, lack of employment and education facilities, poverty, low living standards, and discrimination. Revathi all throughout her life has faced such kinds of derogatory and disheartening situations; all these factors led to her deteriorated life. The novel *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* highlights the events of transgender life, it tells the reader how a trans person has struggled all her life to gain a respectful status in mainstream society. Revathi has dreamt of living a normal life like a woman, where she can embrace marital bliss and children of her own. Revathi states, 'I did not choose this profession on my own. I wanted to live with a man.' (220, Revathi) Thus, throughout the novel, Revathi has questioned society for not being treated as equal to any other person. She faced rejection in her marriage too, which pushed her into depressive life. Therefore, Revathi was forced to perform the male designated role in her family, until she performed the nirvana and get rid of her male reproductive organ. Thus, society needs to understand the atrocities and pains of transgender, their mental state, and health issues. The government should introduce a gender-based curriculum in which the difference between sex and gender of an individual should be taught to the children. Also, the children will learn about the existence of homosexuality, asexuals, bisexuals, and transgenders. Such steps should be taken by the government to create a trans-inclusive environment in society. For instance, Punjab University has established separate restrooms for transgenders on the campus, this encourages a trans-friendly atmosphere. 'This has been made possible by Dhananjay Chauhan, a transgender activist, who has been relentlessly fighting for a separate toilet for the university for three years.' (Think Change India, 2017) Dhananjay Chauhan is the first transwoman in the university, who was pursuing a Master of Rights and Duties. So, the journey of Revathi has introduced the lives of transgender and their way of living and earning their daily bread, it throws light on the fact that transgenders are outcasted from society for their identity.

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