

## REDEFINING HETERONORMATIVITY IN THE LIGHT OF REVATHI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY *THE TRUTH ABOUT ME: A HIJRA LIFE STORY*

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**Abstract:** Writing has been a powerful tool of resistance in literature. Literature including Postcolonial, South Asian, and African Literature was intended to question and redefine the dominant hierarchical structure of the society. The present paper locates Transgender autobiographies as a form of writing which attempts to question the heteronormative structure of the society. Firstly, the paper examines Revathi's autobiography *The Truth About Me: A hijra Life Story* as one of the powerful tools in resisting the binary assumptions of the society. Secondly, the paper discusses the autobiography through Althusser's concepts-Ideological and Repressive State Apparatus. It attempts to analyse the influence of the three ISA's (family, education and legal system) as important indices of the heteronormative pattern in the Indian society. Lastly, the study focuses on how individuals who fail to fulfil the standards of behaviour are prone to violence under RSA (police, the prison system, and government). The scope of the present paper is limited to Revathi's autobiographies and the arguments stated are solely based on the experiences of Revathi ('hijra') which cannot voice out the influence of heteronormativity within the transgender community.

**Key words:** autobiographical writings, heteronormativity, ideology, resistance.

**Introduction:** Transgender autobiography is a phenomenon which attempts to explore the various dimensions of 'hijra' lives and their struggles for establishing an identity. It is "an emerging theoretical orientation" (Nagoshi) on the plurality of gender and also lent a hand in breaking the stereotypical notions that 'hijras are meant to do sex work or beg. It shows how individuals are labelled as 'abnormal' as they fail to perform heteronormatively in the social construct. Transgender writing is a powerful tool to question the dominant ideologies of the society as elucidated below. Print media served as a prominent resistance to colonial powers and served as a voice of the colonised during the Indian war of Independence. A simple example would be how Gandhi nonviolence was inspired by Tolstoy writings. In India, discrimination on grounds of descent is criticised and questioned by subaltern writing. The struggles faced by Indian women which were left unattended in the feminist writing of the west came out only when they started writing their own struggles. So India can be considered as an anecdote to show how 'writing' can question the dominant beliefs and ideologies. Similarly, the discriminations that are often left unnoticed by heteronormative society are recorded through transgender writing which attempts to resist the dominant ideology imposed on the 'hijra' community. It also examines how the laws made by the government are highly patriarchal, which hinders them from leading a normal life like heterosexuals.

Our aim was to challenge stereotypical and incorrect perceptions of sexual minorities (Revathi 560).

*The Truth About Me: A hijra Life Story* is an autobiography of a 'hijra' named Revathi. Born to an upper-class Gownder family, in a small village in Namakkal Taluk, Doraisamy, later named as Revathi

was the youngest boy child of his parents. She grew up shy, culturally effeminate, with an intense inclination to behave like a girl. Initially, it was the societal norms and the rigid attitude of his family and school that stopped Revathi from being her own-self. The autobiography explores the hurdles Revathi faced in establishing her own identity. It also records the discrimination faced by the 'hijra' community, both within their family and in the society.

The autobiography can be seen as one of the powerful attempts to question the societal discrimination against 'hijras'. Firstly, it has the advantage of being written by Revathi, a 'hijra' herself and this gives point of view of a critical insider. Thus the autobiographical writing of a 'hijra' can be portrayed as a powerful weapon which throws light on the societal attitude of injustice towards them.

Revathi's autobiography breaks the stereotypes imposed on the 'hijra' community and portrays their right to live in the society. It also shows how 'hijras' are capable of more than just begging and sex work. The following lines show the resistance involved in transgender writing against heterosexual codes.

That time has long gone, when we live in fear, in the shadows. That day when our rights will be fulfilled is very near. If we come together and struggle we shall avail of those rights (Revathi 314)

Indian Queer Theorists Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan whose book *Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* voices against the narrow perception of differences in sexuality with respect to contemporary Indian society. Similar to this idea, Revathi autobiography also talks about hijras were once accepted as a part of the Indian society.

In the old days, hijras waited upon queens and princesses. But today there are no queens; the rule

of Kings and queens has given way to the rule of ministers. But this government has not given us other works to do. (Revathi 215)

The above lines show how 'hijras' were accepted during King's rule. It is clear then that 'hijras' were considered as a part of the larger society in medieval period. Through this historical reference, the autobiography questions the false notion of considering transgender identity as abnormal and unnatural. Thus Revathi's autobiography can be seen as a powerful mode of writing which attempts to question the dominant ideologies on gender and sexuality.

**Althusser's Ideologies and their influence in the society:** In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* he states, how "ideology relies on obviousness" (Althusser 161) as it is based on our understanding of what is natural. Using Althusser's views on how ideology being a mere social construct, heteronormativity is portrayed as an ideology. Therefore the paper underlines the fact that being 'hijra' is not unnatural despite societal prejudices.

The research traces the influence of ISA's (family, education & legal system) to instil societal norms. The researcher has chosen to concentrate on three major ISA's that pose a concern for Trans individuals: (1) family, (2) education, (3) legal system.

**Family:** To show the heteronormative codes operating within the society, the autobiography focuses on the humiliation faced by Revathi both by her family and by the society at large. This argument can be backed using Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", according to which family and education are agents of the Ideological State Apparatus which try to establish dominant ideologies. In the words of Althusser,

The Ideological State Apparatus "takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most 'vulnerable', squeezed between the family ISA and the educational ISA, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of know-how wrapped in the ruling ideology or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state" (Althusser 147)

These arguments can be justified using Revathi's family, which can be considered as an excellent agent of patriarchy. Revathi's identity as a 'hijra' is seen as a big threat to her family name. Her feminine feelings are treated as madness by her family members. She was considered a burden and her identity as a 'hijra' are treated with hatred and disgust.

Initially, they prevented Revathi from achieving her real identity as 'hijra'. For instance, when Revathi dresses up as a kurathi for Marriamman festival her entire family was against it and felt ashamed by her unmanly act. To them, it is a symbol of humiliation for a boy to dress up as a girl. But Revathi replies to

this heteronormative expectation by stating that, she is a woman trapped in man's body. (Revathi 32). Therefore it becomes quite natural for her to exhibit feminine feelings. But her natural feeling of being a woman remains unacceptable by her family members. To them, being a 'hijra' is an act of sin. They even believed that Revathi is haunted by a female ghost which is the reason for her feminine behaviour.

In the autobiography, there are instances where Revathi was both physically and mentally tortured by her family members because of her refusal to act according to the patriarchal norms. Her refusal to accept the ideologies imposed on her results in physical violence. This violent act of her family members can be related to Althusser's statement on how "ISAs function primarily through ideology and secondarily through repression and violence" (Althusser 138).

When Revathi underwent her sex change operation, she was treated with complete disrespect. She was seen as someone who has polluted the family name. The following lines can be seen as a reflection of the heteronormative codes operating within the family.

As soon as I stepped in, he shut the door, grabbed a cricket bat, and began hitting me, all the while screaming, 'That'll teach you to go with those number 9s. Let's see you wear a sari again, or dance, you mother-fucking pottai!' He beat me hard mindlessly, yelling that he wanted to kill me. (Revathi 256)

Thus Revathi's family members become patriarchal agents who are incapable of accepting her identity. It also shows how society trains the individuals to behave in certain accepted ways.

**Education:** The autobiography also identifies the presence of heteronormative codes in the educational institutions. This idea can be reflected using Althusser's statement on how education being an Ideological State Apparatus.

"In other words, the school (but also other state institutions like the Church or another apparatus like the Army) teaches 'know-how,' but the form which ensures subjections to the ruling ideology or the mastery of it 'practise'". (Althusser 128)

The above "ruling ideology" is seen in Revathi's School where she was often punished for unmanly behaviour. I think I was punished not just for being distracted, but also because I spoke like a girl, holding my body coyly like one (Revathi 14). The autobiography also presents an incident where she was openly humiliated by her PT teacher for not playing boys' games. This shows the presence of cultural ISA in educational institutions where individuals are expected to behave in certain accepted ways. The autobiography points out how being a 'hijra' lead to humiliation among her peer

groups. It shows how Revathi was often addressed with names like 'number nine', 'boy-girl' because of her inability to fulfil the heteronormative expectations of the society.

Revathi's autobiography brings in references on how she is being ill-treated by the college students. Her identity becomes an object of ridicule and humiliation for them. To them, her identity is something which can be mocked at. They feel free to make fun of her by repeating the word 'number nine' and jokes based on the same. These personal anecdotes of marginalization throw larger questions on the efficacy of our educational system in moulding sensitive minds who foster an inclusive society. Formal education goes only so much, if the degree holders are not conditioned to show the courtesy of respecting another, individual, a fellow being.

**Legal system:** The research attempts to bring out the flaws in the Indian law as pointed out by Revathi in her autobiography. It intends to show how most of the laws made by the government are patriarchal in nature. The autobiography also depicts how 'hijras' are deprived of leading a normal life because of the unjust laws operating within the society.

The paper focuses on the injustice faced by the Indian 'hijras'. The researcher tries to question the notion of heteronormativity operating within the Indian society. Adhering to this idea the article "Voicing the Feminine Within: A Journey through the Life Narrative of A.Revathi" also makes a point on how 'hijras' are being marginalised and discriminated in a democratic country like India. Thus the autobiography points out the need to fight for the rights of the 'hijra's who are prone to discrimination and sexual abuses.

The argument can also be justified using the Althusser's concept of Repressive State Apparatus, under which government laws, police, courts can be classified. All these RSA's are constructed according to the dominant ideology and are meant to exhibit violence on those individuals who fails to fulfil the societal expectations. There are numerous instances in the autobiography where Revathi has undergone physical torture by the police who are actually meant to protect individuals. The following incident from the autobiography shows how the laws made by the government are based on dominant beliefs.

We were poor, and besides, we were 'hijras'. We were afraid to go up against him or report him to his family. They were all Marathi-speaking locals and we

would not be able to live here if we opposed them. We did not dare beat him up, neither could we go to the police, we knew the police would give us no support. (Revathi 216)

Through her autobiography, Revathi asserts the rights of her community. She presents how 'hijras' are deprived of enjoying their basic rights in the Indian society. For instance, Revathi's decision to change her sexual identity has deprived her rights of inheriting her family property. The autobiography also states a similar problem which occurred when she intends to take a driving license using her feminine identity.

The author implies the need for the Indian government to provide proper care and medical facilities to the 'hijras' before criticising them as a threat to its culture. We want the Indian state to do the same: provide us with counselling, put us on a course of hormones and assist with sex-change surgeries. (Revathi 604)

It throws lights on the fact that unjust laws can also be seen as a reason for the inferior treatment of 'hijras' by the society. As a result of these laws, the community becomes vulnerable to all forms of discriminations and violence. The autobiography states how Revathi was publicly harassed and brutally attacked by a stranger because of her identity as a third sex. I felt wounded. So many people had watched the man beat me, stared at the spectacle. No one had done anything to help. What sort of world was I living in? (Revathi 497)

The author points out how law and society fail to acknowledge the rights of the 'hijra' community. It focuses on the need for the government to ensure equal rights to the 'hijra's like the rest of the people in the society. This is evident, when she states,

On behalf of everyone here, I request the state to grant us ration cards and housing rights, to ensure employment for us and to provide us medical care. That time has long gone, when we lived in fear, in the shadows. That day when our rights will be fulfilled is very near. If we come together and struggle we shall avail of those rights. (Revathi 603)

The above line shows that 'hijras' too have the freedom to enjoy equal rights like every other heterosexual being. The present paper perceives autobiography as a medium which brings out the awareness and need in redefining such patriarchal assumptions that only heterosexuals are worthy of enjoying certain privileges in the society.

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12. 'Hijra': It is a term used to refer to individuals who are usually mtf's (male to female) who exhibits behaviours conventionally associated with the feminine. They are cross dressers and may or may not undergo sex transition. They often live in a group with their guru and share a strong kingship relationship. They are considered to be the devotees of Buhuchara Mata, a version of the Indian mother goddess.

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