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## **Trauma and Resilience: Representations of Visibly Invisible Bodies in Transgender Narratives**

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**Bhawana Mauni**

Research Scholar, M.B.P.G College, Haldwani

Bhawanapandey08411@gmail.com

**Dr. Kavita Pant,**

Assistant Professor, Pt. Purnanand Tiwari Govt. Degree College, Doshapani.

kavitapant.sp@gmail.com

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### **Abstract**

The spheres of representation have become the mark of invisibility in modern times. Body narratives have become a trend as a result of the revolution that has been led by transgender writers who have embraced their third gender identity and used literature as a tool to speak and share their challenges with the world. Education empowers us to lead a society and speak of its evils. Today, Transgender narratives have become a medium through which the writers are trying to share their experiences and speak about their invisibility. Transgenders have always been a revered section of our Indian culture and society since time immemorial. Despite witnessing their long existence, their bodies have always been represented parochially. Their bodies have always been a victim of the traumas that they have been fighting for to reclaim their lost identity and space. Their criminalization in the hands of the Britishers left them a colonial legacy, which resulted in their marginalization and subjugation, making them the most visibly invisible section of our society. The present paper attempts to study the life of Transgenders as the most vulnerably presented section of our society and how certain discursively practices through their race, gender, and class structures lead to their vulnerability in every sphere. Through their Trans narratives *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Dr. Manabí Bandhopadhyay and *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, the researcher delves deep into their life history and examines how these writers have embraced their identity and taken the path of education to strengthen their existence and fight for their rights in society just like others.

**Keywords:** *Hijra, Trauma, Resilience, Sphere, Colonial, Space, Identity.*

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**Introduction**

Narratives form a very significant part of our culture since time immemorial. The tales of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* witness a culture that follows the tradition of storytelling and narratives, and this has been well embarked on by our ancestors since ancient times. The culture of India, as it is widely known, is rich in diversity in various aspects. Our culture has been home to its various traditions and practices. Since time immemorial, it has embraced the concept of inclusivity in diversity. Inclusiveness is a remarkable phenomenon that has been the root of our culture, which has always preached the pathways of acceptance and modesty. A remarkable aspect of diversity is rooted in the ideas of acceptance regardless of gender, caste, and class. Ancient tales of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* bring us the remarkable ideas of inclusiveness in the fact that they depict the various characters prevailing in society with harmony, providing each individual with equal reverence and magnanimity. Starting from the Ancient period and coming a long way to the modern world, our nation has witnessed a plethora of significant changes that have, in one way or the other, shaped our ideas of sexuality, class, culture, and religion. The ancient world, which was a product of its rich literature and culture, encompassed the Vedas, whose tenets made its citizens prosperous in every field. Our ancient India lime lights a time where inclusivity reigned, and the ideas of gender and sexuality were highly acknowledged. It depicted a period where subjects like sexuality, gender, and sex were far away from being tabooed but rather talked about in everyday life. Ancient culture and its people showed great generosity in their reverent treatment of every individual. The fact that the third gender category played an equal role to other men and women is highly witnessed in the ancient epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which speak of its citizens playing an imperative role in the creation and maintenance of its culture and society.

Significant works like *Manusmriti* and *Kama Shastra* deal with a plethora of instances that record the lives of the third-gender community enjoying a great status while other members embrace their lives and identity heartedly. The idea of sexuality today, in sharp contrast to the ancient Vedic world, is way too regressing for the individuals who go beyond the binary suppositions. These ideas of sexuality were, in fact, a product of the cultural and social practices that have been dominating our minds since colonial times. The mark of reverence that the third-gender society enjoyed in ancient times continued unabated in the Mughal regime as well. The Mughal scriptures detail various incidents where the third-gender community is seen in no other possible way. The colonials, in sharp contrast to the Mughals, broke the ongoing tradition of love and respect that they had been getting for so long and brought their downfall. The colonial rule, to say, had a devastating impact on the lives of these individuals who did not conform to their social and cultural codes. The

colonials, on the pretext of civilization, indoctrinated the Indian psyche against the third-gender community, which remains until today. The status Transgenders, long before the advent of colonials, enjoyed a healthy status in the times of the Mughals, who gave them social as well as political status. The positions of being guards of their harems and their political advisors were, as a matter of fact, brought to decay after the Criminal Tribes Act of 1861, which labeled them as criminals. The Britishers, after annulling their codes and Acts, further created havoc amongst individuals, which caused a major threat to their lives and identity. Transgenders, as they are widely known as *Kinar*, *Hijra*, and *Aravani*, form a community that has been in our culture since a time when the great sages encrypted their greatest scriptures. They witnessed a time when, despite their different sexuality, their community had wide recognition. While considering their existence as a biological phenomenon, Wilhelm Das notes;

"In the Vedic literature, the gender of human beings is precisely divided into three categories, according to Prakriti or nature. They are pums prakriti or male, stri prakriti or female, and tritriya prakriti or the third sex". (Svetasvatara Upanisad, Galva 108)

Transgender literature as a subfield of gender and sexuality studies reveals all such instances of history where they have been witnessed as normal individuals enjoying their proper rights and status. The narratives most appropriately limelight the lives of its writers being marginalized and dehumanized in every possible way by the heteronormative society. The Heteronymous codes and conducts of living a normal life marginalized these individuals as 'others' who cannot conform to their conduct and are thus expelled from mainstream society. Expulsion, however, does cause a major downfall in their lives, causing them to survive on the outskirts of mainstream society.

Literature has definitely served as a major aid to their lives in bringing out their life experiences to the world and fighting for their lives. These narratives assert the intricacies that these individuals go through for being sexually different and not conforming to gender ideologies. These ideologies result in the heteronormative ideas of sexuality that in every way cause their expulsion from society. Transgender writers, through their personal narratives, try to challenge the established binary customs of gender and sexuality. These narratives, as a matter of fact, question the ideas of normalized sexuality and publicly challenge the ideas of sexuality that have caused them a great threat for ages.

Narratives, for instance, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Dr. Manabi Bandyopadhyay and *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, talks about the lives of these

writers ranging from their childhood to a period where they embarked on writing as a panacea to their woes. These narratives have definitely taken the form of biographies, autobiographies, stories, and memoirs, which represent the psyche of the writer detailing the accounts of their life in their personal note. These narratives, on a greater scale, question the established norms of the heterosexual world, which has in every way caused a downfall to the third-gender community and has taken them away from mainstream society. The ideas of heterosexual norms have been a result of the cruel practices of British rule, which dominated our society and made its people work according to their principles. Demystifying the notions of gender and sexuality, these writers have put forward the idea of humanity that has existed in our culture since ancient times, where characters like Shikhandi and Brihanalla got to play their roles reverently regardless of their gender identity. The tale of Shikhandi and Brihnalla, which brings us the idea of sexuality as diverse, definitely makes it apparent that the codes of sexuality that the Britishers annulled are a product of false ideologies that have been deteriorating society for so long. These instances are put forward by transgender writers who, through their narratives, have spoken of their marginality and the denial of their rights by the heterosexual world.

*A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* by Manabi Bandyopadhyay, India's first transgender Principal, uncovers the life of a transgender who has in every possible way tried to depict the life intricacies of not only her personal life but the entire transgender community who are in every possible way marginalized by the heterosexual world. Breaking down the stereotypes, her narrative has emerged as an embodiment of a change that these writers have aimed to bring to society. Born as Somnath, the only boy child of his family, Manabi's story takes us to a world where we actually witness the real struggle of a transgender child who, in every way, becomes the butt of everyday jokes for this society. Narrating the trauma through her own words, she writes;

"I am one of them. All my life, people have called me hijra, biennale, *napungsaka*, *khoja*, and *launder*... and I have lived these years knowing that I am an outcast. Did it pain me? It maimed me... the pain remains, but the ache has dulled with time. It visits me in my loneliest hours when I come face to face with the question of my existential reality. Who am I, and why was I born a woman trapped in a man's body? What is my destiny?" (vii)

The possibility of living a normal life isn't core to the lives of *Hijras* like Manabi, who face abuse by society, which, by hook or by crook, tries to make them feel differently since their childhood. Manabi's childhood, as she clearly remembers, is no different from her other fellow *Hijra* children as she, despite being apt in her studies, had to face abuse by her

schoolmates, teachers, and her known ones. The possibility of being normal and living her childhood like other children was nowhere in her reach. Her narrative recalls various incidents where she becomes a clown that everyone has to make fun of. Presenting the harsh reality of this heterosexual society where educated Transgendered persons like Manabi also faced harassment and sexual abuse. She narrates an incident that shackles our belief in humanity when she was brutally abused by her colleagues for being a *Hijra*;

"They would lurk in every nook and corner and pull my hair and clothes, saying they wanted to see if my hair was real or if I was wearing a wig. Once, two of them pinned me to the wall and groped me, trying to find out what was beneath my clothes. They hissed at me and warned me to keep my mouth shut while they did this."(94)

Stigmas are always central to the lives of *Hijras*, who in every way face discrimination in every arena. Manabi's narrative, on a greater note, shares the deep insights of her life, revealing how the ideas of embracing her identity and self-acceptance helped her carve a niche for herself in this hegemonic heterosexual world. The realization to achieve something great and continue fighting with this world for her own rights and sexuality is quite apparent in her words as she narrates;

"I came to the conclusion that I was a woman and that I had to come out of my shell at any cost. This was my resolution, and I decided to face the challenge head-on. I knew that my life ahead would be far more difficult than what I had already faced...But I was firm. If I had to face death in an effort to establish my true sexual identity, so be it. I would do whatever it took to prove to the world that I was a woman. Once I was able to come to an understanding with myself, I became a calmer person."(110)

Leaving behind the struggles and abuses, Manabi's determination to accomplish success in her life and be an exemplar to her fellow *Hijras* has carved a niche for her amongst her abusers. Accepting her real identity and fighting for her rights has been central to her story. Becoming the first-ever transgender to hold a PhD and a Principal position says it all as she calls it a rare feat, the media has proclaimed' (viii). Penning down her words, she recalls those incidents and writes;

"Memories rush back as I sit down to write down my story. I write with the belief that it would help society understand people like me better. We are slightly different outwardly, but we are humans just as you are and have the same needs- physical and emotional – just as you have."(ix)

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Revathi's narrative *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, on the same note, shares the real struggles of a transgender person who, discarding the societal notions of sexuality, intends to live her life on her own terms. Revathi was born as Doraisamy, a boy in society, and lived her whole life in extremes, as she narrates in her story. The advantage of being a boy and getting familial love was aberrant to the life of Revathi, who, despite her determination, faced abuse from her loved ones. As a child, she got pushed into the outskirts of this society for her different sexual orientation, which was expressed in her love for art and dance. Her love for art and dance depicts the inner desires of a child who left no stone unturned to be her and presents her actual desires to the world. However, this sexual orientation to be the other sex caused a major dilemma in her life as she often got assaulted for her femininity, as she narrates;

"I remember being caned for 'not being brave like a boy.' Since I did not play boys' games, I was 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 me feel as if he was going to strip me, and I would start crying. The other boys laughed at this." (7)

This abuse remains unabated in the lives of transgenders who, despite being advanced in every field, tend to face harassment on a wider scale. This trauma, as Revathi narrates, isn't limited to physical damage but to an emotional level as well. This causes great damage to the inner psyche of the individual, and it erases all their hopes of living their life ordinarily. Revathi discusses an event where she admits the damage that an abuser caused to her for being a transgender who, for him, had no level of reverence in his world;

"I was hurting all over, and yet had to give in and do as he told me. The skin down there felt abraded, and I was bleeding. Unmindful, he left, but only after he had snatched my purse away from me. Men like him will understand the terror and pain they cause only if they become hijras and are hurt by rowdy men such as themselves." (108)

Harassment and abuse, as Revathi presents, are quite central to her life. Getting traumatized first by her family members, in her school environment, and then ranging to her profession, her body had been a victim of physical as well as emotional abuse that has in every way caused her inner damage. The abuse that she received had no barriers. It remained unabated in her life till the point she realized her inner worth. She narrates an event where her family once treated her like an alien that has entered the world unknowingly and needs to be killed at any cost;

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“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, I who had dared to run away... That’s right. Beat him and break his bones. Only then will he stay at home and not run away, I heard my mother say.”(55)

The abuse, however, as she perceives today, turned the opposite in her case. The damage that society and her known ones caused her in every way made her who she stands today. Revathi’s constant endeavor to come out of the margins that society has created for their society is a mark of hope for her entire transgender community. Being a victim of the abuse that society caused her, Revathi’s constant endeavor to work for the upliftment of her community has presented herself as an embodiment of a change that needs to be addressed in this society. Her love for activism working for groups like SANGAMA definitely helped her achieve her desired goals. Living up to a marginalized life and being a victim of sexual as well as psychological abuse, her narrative limelights the changes that the transgender community ought to receive at any cost. Her words justify it all;

“Someone beats me, pinches me, scolds me, I hurt. I feel hungry, I have to eat, I have to cover my shame with clothes. I, too, need to be with my loved ones. I want their affection. I want to experience pleasure. I long for respect. I want to live a life full of dignity. I want to work as many women do.” (219)

## **Conclusion**

Writers like Manabi and Revathi have today emerged as icons of a revolution that has come in the lives of the transgendered community. The revolution definitely came out as a result of these writers’ firm determination and their self-beliefs in speaking of their rights and priorities. These narratives, on a greater note, highlight the struggles of these authors to come forward and believe in their dreams of living a normalized life just like others. A firm, determined mind like these authors definitely helps in bringing forth the values of humanity and living accordingly. Challenging these binary norms, these writers have set forth a challenge for their society to come out of their closets and accept their individuality. The idea of living their desired life, as these narratives mention, is achievable with acceptance, as Revathi writes in the preface;

"I hope by now that by publishing my life story, larger changes can be achieved. I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the right to live in this society." (vi)

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