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**Performing the Self: Gender Performativity and Trans Identity in  
*Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi**

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**Abstract**

This research paper examines *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*, an autobiographical work by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi through the lens of Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. This paper aims to demonstrate how gender identity is structured by society and is repeatedly performed and shaped into reality in Tripathi's memoir. It reveals that the identity of the transgender is assigned with validation, visibility and relationships. Tripathi through her memoir does more than narrating her personal experience; she used language as a tool to performs identity and demands social acceptability. The study shows that in contemporary India, autobiography becomes a political act that challenges dualistic gender norms. This paper analyses how self-fashioning, relational dynamics, hijra cultural history, and legal recognition interconnects in the text using gender performativity as the central theoretical framework. The contemporary universal debates about the transgender community rights and visibility are also interconnected in Tripathi's work. Thus, this research claims that *Red Lipstick* functions both as a literary narrative and a social intervention, proving that repetition, recognition, and narrative authority produce identity.

**Keywords:** gender performativity, transgender autobiography, hijra identity, recognition, self-narration, contemporary gender politics

**Introduction**

One of the most debated and politically stimulating issues in contemporary society navigates around gender identity. The transgender individuals continue to demand visibility, dignity, and equal rights all over the world. In India, transgender persons were legally recognized as a third gender in the 2014 Supreme Court judgment in *National Legal Services*

*Authority v. Union of India*. However, legal recognitions alone never guarantee social acceptance. Even today, the cultural belief, social expectations, family traditions, accepted practices, and pre-established unwritten laws define male and female.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016) surfaces within this socio-political context. The memoir traces Tripathi's journey from a confused childhood towards self-recognition as a hijra, activist, dancer, and public speaker. The memoir exposes gender as something assigned through repeated actions, relationships, and social connections, rather than making it stable and predetermined.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is applied in this paper to analyse how Tripathi builds and proclaims her identity. Butler argues that, gender is not a natural fact but "a stylized repetition of acts" that produces the illusion of an internal essence (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 191). *Red Lipstick* becomes an account of performance, recognition, and resistance through this lens. Tripathi's autobiography functions as a performative act that converts the private experiences of the trans community into public legitimacy, through which she claims and demands the rights of the transgender community.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Judith Butler and Gender Performativity**

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges the belief that, gender is biologically fixed. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that what society comprehends as "man" or "woman" is not a natural truth but a social construct conserved through repetition (Butler 25). People perform gender through gestures, clothing style, speech tone, body posture, and behaviour. Therefore, an illusion of stability is shaped through this repeated acts.

Notably, Butler elucidates that performativity does not mean intended performance. Individuals do not freely choose gender in a dramatic or theatrical sense; rather, they function within norms already established by society (Butler 178). These models are imposed through reward and punishment. Society reacts with correction, ridicule, exclusion, or violence when someone diverges from expected behaviour.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler further underscores that recognition is indispensable to identity. Without social recognition, an individual's gender remains meaningless within dominant frameworks (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 2). Thus, the identity of a person requires both performance and acknowledgment.

This framework is predominantly pertinent for transgender narratives. Trans identities represents the variability of binary categories and expose that all gender is constructed. As Susan Stryker records, transgender lives show that gender boundaries are neither natural nor permanent (Stryker 12).

This paper claims that, the work *Red Lipstick* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi demonstrates how a gender is continuously produced through repetition of actions, relational negotiation, and

narrative expression, using Butler's theory of Gender Performativity. This paper brings back the point that gender is socially constructed rather than innate or inborn and the gender roles are to be chosen by the individuals themselves.

### **Childhood and the Policing of Gender Norms**

Tripathi's childhood experiences are marked by confusion and social discomfort in her memoir. She felt drawn toward feminine gestures, clothing, and expression, even though she was a young boy assigned male at birth. Triggered reactions from family, peers, and community members were also the reason behind the eruption of these behaviours. Butler clarifies that, society begins imposing gender norms early in childhood (Butler 25). Boys are expected to display their masculine strength, manly aggression, and strong emotional control. Whereas, girls are encouraged toward feminine softness, care, and modesty. When children depart from these beliefs, they are disciplined and made feel that they are wrong through mockery or correction.

This process of regulation is exposed through Tripathi's recollections of teasing and misunderstanding. Her body became a site of scrutiny and analysis, her movements were inspected and her voice was mediated. These experiences of Tripathi demonstrate how gender norms are internalized through repetition and social demand or pressure. Erving Goffman's notion of "presentation of self" further elucidates this. According to Goffman, individuals perform roles in everyday interactions to maintain social acceptance (Goffman 22). The tension between forced roles and internal identity is evident through the lens of Tripathi's early life. The more society demands masculine performance, more visible gap has been created between expectation and experience.

### **The Hijra Community and Cultural Identity**

Tripathi finds her belonging within the hijra community as she grows older. Serena Nanda's anthropological study *Neither Man nor Woman* describes that hijras occupy a distinct cultural position in South Asia (Nanda 43). Historically, ritual roles at weddings and births are performed by the hijras. However, colonial law outlawed their existence, reinforcing disgrace to the community.

The Western notions of transgender identity is complicated with the hijra identity. It chains spiritual tradition, community structure, and gender free-spiritedness. Tripathi enters a space where femininity is performed collectively and ritually, by joining this hijra community. Yet, social marginalization persists even within this cultural structure. Hijras are often barred from mainstream employment and accommodation. Thus, the identity of a person is both empowering and limiting.

This paradox can be clearly explained with the help of Butler's theory. Gender norms are dominant precisely because they appear to be natural. The society reacts aggressively when hijras noticeably challenge these norms. The memoir illustrates that, belonging to the hijra community delivers emotional support but does not eliminate discrimination as a whole.

**Red Lipstick as Symbolic Performance**

It is evident that the title *Red Lipstick* is deeply symbolic. The word Lipstick represents femininity, visibility, and assertion. It is not merely cosmetic used to add beauty; it is a marker of identity which acts as a symbol of empowerment.

Butler defines gender as a stylized repetition of acts (Butler 191). Wearing lipstick, dressing in feminine attire and style, and performing dance become repeated assertions of self. Each and every action done contributes to the social construction of gender identity. The bold and visible nature makes the Red lipstick more particular and special. It declines invisibility. Such visibility becomes more political in a society that often tries to erase transgender identities. bell hooks claims that marginalized individuals reclaim power by redefining representation (hooks 7). Tripathi transforms an orthodox indicator of femininity into a testimony of existence by choosing red lipstick as a symbol.

**Relationships and Conditional Recognition**

The importance of relational identity is evident through the use of the subtitle, *The Men in My Life*. Gender does not exist in seclusion; it depends on recognition from others. Butler claims that, recognition determines whether a life is considered “livable” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 39). The complexities of such recognition is revealed through Tripathi’s relationships with men.

Some people express secluded affection but refuse to acknowledge it in public. Others glorify her identity while disagreeing her emotional legitimacy. These experiences demonstrate how heteronormative expectations of the current world shape the intimate relationships.

Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality elucidates how society privileges relationships that fit binary norms (Rich 637). When a relationship challenges these structured norms of the narrow minded society, it is rendered invisible or illegal. Tripathi’s narrative reveals that, without social recognition and acceptance love alone is insufficient and cannot survive. It is mandatory that, the identity must be approved publicly to achieve acceptability.

**Autobiography as Performative Act**

Autobiography itself is self-construction and not merely a collection of memory. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson claims that, writing about life allows marginalized individuals to claim narrative authority (Smith and Watson 4). Tripathi performs identity through storytelling in the work *Red Lipstick*. She transmutes personal history into public testimony by narrating experiences of brutal abuse, mental as well as physical desires, activism, and resilience.

Michel Foucault relates confession and self-narration to power structures (Foucault 61). However, confession becomes empowerment in Tripathi’s t memoir. Tripathi controls

her own narrative rather than being controlled by dominant discourse. The act of writing has become a form of gender performance. Through language, she declares who she is.

### **Legal Recognition and Contemporary India**

The 2014 NALSA judgment in India was a striking historic moment for the transgender community and their struggles for their rights. This judgment by the Supreme Court affirmed the right to self-identify one's gender. This decision aligns with Butler's argument that identity requires institutional validation (Butler 205).

However, Nivedita Menon cautions that, legal change does not automatically transform social attitudes (Menon 88). Even with activism and media presence, discrimination continues and this tension is evident even in Tripathi's memoir. The Modern-day disputes over the transgender healthcare, educational access, and employment demonstrates the unending resistance to non-binary identities. The transgender individuals face violence and systemic inequality worldwide (UN Human Rights Office). Tripathi's memoir remains deeply relevant in this context.

### **Digital Visibility and Modern Performance**

Digital culture has overtaken the twenty-first century, and the gender performance extends into the digital spaces. Social media magnifies visibility but at the same time can become threatening through constant surveillance and harassment.

Sarah Banet-Weiser notes that, digital culture simultaneously empowers and commodifies marginalized identities (Banet-Weiser 45). Similarly, in the case of Tripathi, her public persona exists within this pressure. She had to face and surpass numerous battles in different forms. The media visibility can bring recognition, money and fame but it also exposes individuals to scrutiny and harassment. Thus repeated performance of the gender becomes constant and remains accepted by the public.

### **Discussion: Identity, Resistance, and Recognition**

*Red Lipstick* reveals gender self-motivated and relational through the framework of Butler. The identity of an individual is produced through the repetition of certain code of conduct, challenged through resistance, and authenticated through acknowledgement.

Tripathi's memoir proves that transgender existence reveals the fabricated nature of all gender identities. If gender were natural and fixed, abnormality would not provoke such strong reactions like sex change operations. The memoir also strongly claims that recognition remains significant because, without public acknowledgment and acceptance, identity remains socially insubstantial.

### **Conclusion**

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* offers an influential example of gender performativity in action. Tripathi builds a visible and authentic identity within a society regulated by binary norms through the repeated acts of self-fashioning and narrative assertion.

Using Judith Butler's theory, this paper has shown that, gender is not a biological fate but a socially created reality continued through repeated actions and recognition. The memoir transmutes autobiography into a political intervention. It exhibits that, telling one's story is itself an act of becoming.

*Red Lipstick* remains crucial in the contemporary debates about transgender rights. It reminds readers that identity is produced through courage, repetition, and public acknowledgment and is not granted by biology alone.

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