

UNRAVELING A NEW LITERARY GENRE: STUDIES ON TRANSGENDER AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract

Transgender autobiography is an emerging literary genre. Though depiction and representation of transgenders were found in literary genres like travel writing, drama, poems and novels one cannot study transgenders in the light of these genres. It will give an inadequate picture of transgender's life. There are depictions of transgender or eunuchs in earliest Indian literature texts (Brahminical, Buddhist and Jain) and Indian epics (Mahabharata, Ramayana and Puranas) which deal with the ostensible history of third sex in India. In other genres, like in the travelogue, City of Djinns by William Dalrymple there is a depiction of eunuchs' as dancers quoting the early history. In Delhi: A Novel by Khushwant Singh, which is also considered as an autobiographical work describes the author's relationship with a eunuch prostitute named Bhagmati. Narcopolis, the debut novel of Jeet Thayil set in Bombay concerns opium and its influence but it also portrays a eunuch prostitute named Dimple who works in these opium dens. Autobiography is also a literary genre which is known for its use by women to uncover their hidden lives, but transgender autobiography capture the transgender experience with their bodies in accordance with their gender identity. It doesn't intend to uncover hidden lives, but it tries to bring to the fore the already visible transgender community, and a need to understand their lives. Mary Evans mentions: 'When individuals write autobiographies, they locate themselves as people who have had a battle or battling against a particular culture or society (37).' This paper will study transgender autobiographies as a literary genre which will enable better understanding of transgender lives and issues. Moreover it will try to establish the relevance of 'T' in the term 'LGBT' (Lesbian, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgender) and a need to study their autobiographies.

Keywords: Transgender, Autobiography, Gender Studies, Sexuality, Sex.

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INTRODUCTION:

Gender Studies is an interdisciplinary area that covers the debates related to feminism, anthropology and queer theory that further includes Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transgenders. Gays and Lesbians are categorized as 'homosexuals', as the term refers to people who are intrinsically attracted to people of their own sex. Bisexuals are the ones attracted to both men and women. 'Transgender' is a term that defines people who have a gender identity or gender expression different from their assigned sex or biological sex. The term further implies a movement away from an initially assigned gender position.

Francis-Cranny in the book *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (2003) critiques, 'In sexuality studies, the focus is upon sexualities that is, upon sexual object choice and desire rather than upon sexed identities- that is gender' (7-9, 17-33). Though, transgender studies comes under the umbrella term gender studies, gender studies continues to be more dominated by discussion of women's marginality. Sexuality studies has become more balanced in its analysis of both gay and lesbian agendas, as well as trans and intersex debates.

According to Susan Stryker's study, "Transgender studies: Queer theory's Evil Twin" (2004), 'transgender studies is born of sexuality studies and feminism, and like its "evil" sibling, queer theory, has much to offer both' (212). In her book *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006), she mentions 'it is as a field that documents the "subjugated knowledges" of and about transgender persons, knowledges that have buried, devalued, or erased' (12-13). It also develops theories of embodiment, sexuality, and gender, as well as legal, social, and political theories concerning the regulation of gender expression and embodiment. Most important is Stryker's (2006) insistence that transgender studies, 'far from being an inconsequentially narrow specialization dealing only with a rarified population of transgender individuals, or with an eclectic collection of esoteric transgender practices, represents a significant and ongoing critical

engagement with some of the most trenchant issues in contemporary humanities, social science and biomedical research'(3-4).

Transgenders are also called as 'transsexuals' when they undergo transition from one sex to another. In India, there has been in existence a community of people known as hijras also variously described in literature as eunuchs, transvestites, hermaphrodites, androgynes, transsexuals, intersexed and gynemimetics. They are also referred to as people who are emasculated, impotent, transgendered, castrated and effeminate or sexually anomalous or dysfunctional. Eunuch is the most widely used English translation of the word *hijra*, which has an Urdu origin. The term 'transgender' also relates to a diversity of practices that call into question traditional ways of seeing gender and its relationship with sex and sexuality. The term 'Transgender' also covers a plethora of other terms which are used as variations to describe a community of people known as *hijras*. *Hijras*, *aravanis*, *jogappa*, *khusra*, *kojja*, *kinnar*, *napunsaka*, *akwa* are the variations of their names. *Hijras*, as they are called all over India are taken as 'neither man nor woman' (Nanda 7).

The first domain of literature about *hijras* relate to the analysis of ancient Indian texts (Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain). It addresses the ostensible history of the third sex and sexuality in India. As Sweet and Zwilling puts it in their study "Like a City Ablaze": The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature" (1996), 'the category of a third sex has been a part of the Indian world view for nearly three thousand years' (362). These authors set out to elucidate this category variously referred in Sanskrit (Hindu) and Pali (Buddhist) texts as *kliba*, *pandaka*, *trityaprakriti*, or more commonly as *napunsaka* providing historical evidence for a premodern (and pre-Islamic) concept of sexuality and the category of sexual thirdness in India. Serena Nanda in her ethnography *Neither Man nor Woman* (1992) states: 'notions of *hijra*, found in classical Hinduism, were divided into four categories: the male eunuch, the hermaphrodite, the testicle voided, and the female eunuch' (177).

There are various myths and folklores attached to the *hijra* community in India that gives them a supernatural status. *Hijras* in India also have cultural roles to perform. This inheritance of power of the *hijra* community is the result of various portraits of *Hijra* characters depicted in Islamic Mythology and Hindu Mythology such as *Puranas* and popular Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

Hindu Mythology makes references to queerness, the idea that questions the notions of maleness and femaleness. There are portrayals of Male-to-Female and Female-to-Male transgender. It also mentions creatures that are ambiguous like *makara*. *Makara* is neither fish nor an elephant but a combination of both. It is also the emblem of *Kamadeva*, the god of lust and desire. *Yali* is a combination of lion and an elephant. It is a mythical creature seen in Hindu temples, often sculpted onto the pillars. It has been widely used in south Indian sculptures. As Devdatt Pattnaik in *Shikhandi and other tales they don't tell you* (2014) mentions that “there are also many words in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil such as *kliba*, *napunsaka*, *mukhabhaga*, *sanda*, *panda*, *pandaka*, *pedi* that suggest a long familiarity with queer thought and behavior” (12).

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

The role of *hijras* deeply rooted in Indian culture epics cannot be overlooked though the confusion regarding their birth and appearance remain ambiguous. This ambiguity in appearance is a part of various Hindu mythologies. In Hindu mythologies, rituals are an important vehicle to transmit Hindu world view and it contains numerous examples of androgynes, impersonators of the opposite sex, sex change both among deities and humans. These mythical figures that are a part of Indian culture explain the power of *Hijras* to maintain a significant place for themselves in Indian society in ‘an institutionalized third gender role’ (Nanda 20).

Not only in Indian epics are depictions of Hijras found, but in recent literatures like travelogues, novels, there are portrayals of *hijra* as a character. In the travelogue, *City of Djinnis: A Year in Delhi* (1994) by William Dalrymple describes eunuchs:

They were clad in glittering gold brocade. They were heavily made up, with painted cheeks and scarlet lipstick; each of their noses was pierced with a single diamond stud. They were dressed for the nautch, dressed as women, yet they were not women. Physically, they resembled painted men, yet they were not men (169).

He further elaborates on their situation in the Mughal era that, ‘Yet despite their frequent appearances in public, very little is actually known about the Indian eunuchs. They are fiercely secretive and of their own choice inhabit a dim world of ambiguity and half truths’ (170).

The author describes eunuchs by the way they look or through historical references. He also tries to bring out many conversations in the text with the eunuchs he encountered. There are depictions of eunuch in the Mughal courts in earlier times and elucidates the dual traditions of

eunuchry Hindu and Muslim tradition. Though depictions and representations of eunuchs found in various literatures alike, it doesn't give a clear and succinct picture of their lives. It gives a prejudiced view of their lives.

In the novel *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil, which focuses on the opium dens in Bombay and also tries to present the life of Dimple, who is a eunuch prostitute working in the opium dens. It only shows the one sided picture of a eunuch's life i.e., engaging in prostitution which can limit reader's imagination about them.

Before Dimple came to be called Zeenat, she worked part- time for Rashid and disappeared every evening to hijra's brothel. I asked the usual foolish questions. Is it better to be a man or a woman? Dimple said: For conversation, better be a woman, for everything else, for sex, better to be a man. Then I asked if she was a man or a woman and she nodded as if it was the first time she'd been asked (1).

Similarly in the novel, *Delhi: A Novel* Khushwant Singh, portrays the story of a journalist (an autobiographical figure) and his relationship with a eunuch prostitute named Bhagmati. Many novelists and travel writers have tried to portray their encounters with transgenders in their works which is limiting them to just being eunuch- prostitute, dancers, or guards in the courts. Even in the Indian epics and texts transgender portrayal reveals their status as conferring blessings on childbirths and to newlyweds. But the question about their identity and status remained unanswered. None of the Indian epics or literature presents elaborately the intricacies of *hijra* lives. The mere mention of third sex in texts and literature cannot do justice with their identity. Likewise there are many more stories and poems in which depictions of transgenders can be found.

Autobiography is an established genre in literature and it attempts to establish a way of reading the lives of others. In the history of writing English autobiography, the crucial transformation of the genre was in 1967 and it transformed from a search for the person to a search for a convinced reading. It has shifted to a search for an interpretation of how the individual could be located within a particular milieu. Mary Evans mentions that, 'Autobiography demonstrates the way in which individuals are perceived and judged both within the culture and by those with more distance from it' (37). Further, she gives example of 'the feminist 'project' of using autobiography to uncover the hidden lives of women' (37). Autobiographies depict the inner journey of the self and the inner struggles of the person. It

establishes a coherent and individual identity to the person depicted. The social upheaval got expression not only in poetry and fiction but also in the autobiographies. The autobiographical genre got a new meaning and opened up new vistas of knowledge for all. Autobiography is known for its use by women to uncover their secrets and sufferings by patriarchy most of the times. But now a new literary genre that needs to be focused on is the transgender autobiographies. Transgender studies is an established discourse in academia in the West but in India it is overlooked. There are many autobiographies written by transgenders in the West but in India it is a new genre and a new phenomenon which needs to unravel. With the advent of transgender autobiographies, it will provide a broader platform for transgenders to discuss their issues in terms of acceptability not only in front of law but also to the society in general.

Transgender autobiography is an emerging literary genre. The transgender autobiographies written in recent years are Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick; The Men in my Life* (2016) and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015), A Revathi's *The Truth About Me* (2010), Vidya's *I Am Vidya* (2007). These are autobiographies written by Male to Female Transgenders in India. These autobiographies capture the transgender experience with their bodies in accordance with their gender identity. It also captures their self discovery as transsexuals and their struggle to come out of that identity by taking hormones, undergoing surgeries and it could re-establish a cisgender identity. These select autobiographies provide ample scope for the analysis of transgender identity and sexuality. There is a lot of difference in being a transgender and depicting individual experiences and being a non-transgender or a cisgender and depicting about transgender experiences as perceptions and opinions would be prejudiced and inadequate. Autobiographies of transgenders on the other hand provides an authentic picture of their lives.

In the recent autobiography *Red Lipstick: The Men in my Life*(2016) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, who is a transgender rights activist, deals with her struggles of being a boy and behaving in a girlish manner. It further deals with existential questions such as 'Is Laxmi both a man and a woman? Or, perhaps, neither a man nor a woman' (1)? In her another autobiography *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* (2015) she writes, 'Hijras are normal people, just like others. We're not extraterrestrial. We have emotions, just like ordinary human beings and perhaps more sensitive than them' (125).

In another autobiography *The Truth about Me* (2010) by A. Revathi, she presents her struggles of being a female in a male body, 'what have I done wrong? It was you who made me

male in form, but with female feelings' (57). She also exemplifies her everyday struggle of going out and being teased in the buses or on the roadside. 'What a voice! A man's voice, da! they'd retort and laugh' (172).

In *I am Vidya* (2007) by Vidya, she explains her comfort levels in her feminine avatar and her fondness of dressing up as a female since childhood. 'Actually, I was pretending to imitate a girl for fun and they liked my 'acting' but in reality, I was not acting but subtly expressing my inner urges' (59). She holds on to a very strong point that;

Dalits have a voice, feminists are heard, they can hold rallies, demand their rights. But transgenders are the Dalits of Dalits, the most oppressed women among women. They enjoy no freedom, no fraternity. They continue to lead a wretched life devoid of pride and dignity (141).

These transgender autobiographies are their revelations about their lives which will help us to understand and enquire about their lives.

CONCLUSION:

Transgender autobiography is an emerging literature genre which will enable further academic discourses on transgender and will also help establish transgender studies as a discipline in academia. There is a need of a platform other than law and order to understand the intricacies of their identity. With the coming of their autobiographies, it will provide a base to understand their self, identity and sexuality and also hope to contribute to a better understanding of transgender lives and their existence in present.

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