

BREAKING THE MOULD: A STUDY OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A TRANSGENDER LAXMI

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Abstract

The paper studies the different socio-cultural issues reflected in the autobiography of a transgender Laxmi Narayan Tripathi titled Me Hijra Me Laxmi. The autobiography deals with various problems of transgender Laxmi a protagonist, shows her efficacious attitude towards her bleak life. She fights against her mental agony and sufferings due to physical abuse during her childhood. She learns classical dance and becomes dance trainer and model coordinator to provide models for fashion shows. She is also a social activist. She has ability to link with the people implementing her ideas with logic and purpose. Many works on transgender have been done to represent the social, cultural and economic issues and these works have been placed under LGBTQ writing. No work has been done so far to depict the journey of success of a transgender that may bridge a gap between bleak life of a transgender and the mainstream society. The present study unfolds that how the stereotype society treats transgender and how a transgender Laxmi breaks a mould through her journey of success.

Keywords: Transgender, LGBTQ, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, transgender in India

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Many works on transgender have been done to represent the social, cultural and economic issues and these works have been placed under LGBTQ writing. *Shikhandi and Other Tales* by Devdutt Patnayak digs out different tales from Indian traditional mythology telling the existence of *Hijras* for various purpose. *The truth about me: A Hijra Life Story* an autobiography by Revathi draws a parallel to the other autobiographies of transgender. No work has been done so far to depict the success journey of a transgender that may bridge a gap between bleak life of a transgender and the mainstream society.

In the title of the present paper "Breaking the Mould: A Study of an Autobiography of a Transgender Laxmi" where Breaking the mould means one does completely different things from what has been done before or from what is usually done. That suggests what has been seen before in a transgender's autobiography is different from what has been seen in this personal narrative by the protagonist Laxmi.

The paper studies the different socio-cultural issues reflected in the autobiography of a transgender Laxmi Narayan Tripathi titled *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*. The autobiography deals with various problems of transgender like identity crisis, lack of earning sources for basic needs, social discrimination due to different physical appearance etc. that exist in this modern society. In spite of all these problems, Laxmi a protagonist, shows her efficacious attitude towards her bleak life. She fights against her mental agony and sufferings due to physical abuse during her childhood. Gradually with her growing age she becomes stronger to tackle her situation. As she mentions in this excerpts-

The first time I have refused to have sex with Shashi's friends, they were upset and angry.... I discovered that passivity did not pay. It might endear me to society, but it came with a price. I decided at that moment to raise my voice against the things I did not like. Henceforth, I would not do anything against my will. Me Hijra Me Laxmi 8.

In the present excerpt, her determination of not letting them (her brother's friends) to touch her, is tremendously appreciable and it also reflects her own mental balancing power. She starts living social life happily and states that she started enjoying the company of mature people and learns good lessons for life as she reveals the story of improvement of her English 'Sangita Sethi was one such friend....Sangita encouraged me and to participate in elocution competitions at school she prepared me for these and I won prizes (Laxmi 9).' Like this Laxmi commands on English herself and gradually becomes good speaker that helped her to connect not only with elite class of main stream society but also around the world that the reader sees in the later part her autobiography. Her strong determination becomes her power that helped in shaping her personality. She feels she has got some mental relief after learning dance a path where she is looking forward herself, her identity. As she admits that 'Dancing saved me. It was the therapy hadn't given up, in spite of going through turbulent times. In a way, it was my dancing, complete with my feminine movements of the waist, that contributed to my being thought of effeminate. But I did not care (Laxmi 23).'

Later she also realises that dance is not only for her mental peace but it worked like an embellishment for her strange physical appearance. She follows her dance teacher Baby Johnny. She has learned her given tips and adapted in her personality. Hence Baby Johnny played very important role in her life for shaping her personality.

Laxmi starts her own dance classes and established herself as a dance trainer. Despite of her various enduring life tragedy she learns classical dance Bharatanatyam. She was suffering from different transitions of her life such as emotional, physical and social. She manages to escape when a group of teenagers about to attempt rape on her. That incident emotionally damaged her but it made stronger as well. She also becomes model

coordinator to provide models for fashion shows during her graduation. She started working for a bar as a dancer but she was sure about her decision as she dictates with gush-‘I did not have sex in exchange of money. I have always considered myself to be monarch of my own body(Laxmi 35)’

After experiencing the company of gay community like Ashok Kavi Row and Vivek Anand, she realises that she is not gay but a woman and later meeting of Shabina, a born male turned hijra gives strength to her thought of being woman from inside. She learns the importance of hijra community and their rituals. As a result she finds answers to the question that used to raise in her mind from the beginning. She becomes hijra after performing some rituals that solace her soul and she confesses as ‘...on the whole, life was good. I was proud that I was Hijra (Laxmi 52)’

Once she lost her senior most chela Shubhadra in a tragedy. During the investigation, police harassed hijras by abusing and interrogating them. She realises the pathetic situation of Hijra community. How this mainstream society treats Hijra and that also matters how hijras deal with the society which needs improvement. Her efforts in her words ‘I gave my chelas a crash course on hijra behaviour. I taught them how to face the cops, when to abuse, and when to be gentle, and taught them many things besides (Laxmi 56).’ She did not stop at this juncture. She started working for DWS that strengthen her exposé and she acts as a bridge between transgender community and mainstream society.

I became a peer educator who went to hijra colonies to educate the hijras about sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS. Here I learnt from Sabina and Priya who were experienced social workers Social service can be a bitter pill with adverse side effects. But I was determined to dedicate my life to social work. Laxmi 60-61.

In main stream society, right to education is one of the fundamental rights. Laxmi is aware of this fact that her knowledge that she can use as weapon to fight against problems that a transgender faces in her normal life. She becomes aware of the fact that she has some duties as she is the part of neglected community. Understanding the need of her community she educates them, instructs them, and takes lot of efforts to get rid of unwanted diseases from the society as hijra would also be the source of such disease. Like this she becomes

strong social activist. That helped her to develop her understanding her community in both ways as a member and as an instructor, a mentor. She uses her knowledge and her various exposure for the welfare for the society by helping her community time to time. Whether it is related to health, police query, rebel against government etc. Each of these engagements brings new lesson for her life and valuable experience for her career. It seems that she dedicates her life for her community her learning attitude gives her knowledge and her knowledge gave her various opportunities to present her community at various level. She made '..presentation at the Mumbai District AIDS Control Society(MDACS*-) (Laxmi 64)' that proved to be worthfull in her later career. Her every new exposor was making her way towards success. For AIDS awareness she becomes the chairman of DWS. Later phase 'DWS drew international attention'(Laxmi 70). Dorothy a German national started directing a film on hijras in India titled *Between the Lines* and Laxmi got the lead role as a hijra in the movie. The movie earned fame for her and 'was premiered at the Lokarno film Festival in Switzerland in 2005.(Laxmi 72)'. She had been invited for prestigious roundtable conference in Mumbai on the status of HIV and AIDS in India. She was presenting her hijra community this must be her proud moment that gives her strength to communicate to link with the people implementing her ideas with logic and purpose. Moreover she was guided and supported by Dr. Alka Gogate of the MDACS to attend this conference. Laxmi participated enthusiastically adding one more kind of experience in her journey of success.

She got invitation from Tornto as she mentions- 'I was invited to my first international conference abroad-the Sixteenth World AIDS Conference to be held in Toronto Canada in August 2006. And I would be going to the conference as part of a prestigious UN AIDS delegation: no mean achievement for Hijra (Laxmi 78)'. After struggling for passport very hard she manages to own a passport that adds one exposure in her experience of treatment of hijras for society. She landed Toronto and gave her speech on Hijras and their problems' in the conference. She immediately got feedback from her audiences that was positive and encouraging for her. 'Dennis Brown, the UN AIDS chief. 'Laxmi, I am proud of you,' he said to me.'(Laxmi 87)'. She stated it in her autobiography very proudly. After this achievement, she had been invited in many TV shows so she was no more a common hijra she has earned fame to make her unique identity.

The journey of her success was not end to TV shows but also reached to the invitation and her participation in many prestigious international conferences and film festivals to

represent her community at world level such as the Netherlands Transgender Film Festival, Amsterdam India Festival, United Nations General Assembly Special Session.

After such achievement one cannot believe that she once asked to leave a party because of her sexuality. She realised that people need to be educated and to be sensitised on such issues. She doesn't give up her efforts as she mentions in her autobiography.- 'The Bombay Gym episode motivated me to fight for transgender rights with renewed vigour. Some of us Hijras filed a complaint against the Government of India, alleging that we were denied our basic rights.(Laxmi 130)'.

To encourage her community she takes many steps she educate them in various ways she taught them to behave with main stream society. She prepares a troupe of hijra and performed dance in Amsterdam India Festival. She organised a beauty contest for Hijras from various cities of India to encourage them. Obvious that it was hijras first time at such platform but they have participated enthusiastically as Laxmi was the motivation for them.

Thus, one needs to understand despite of discouragement from her Lataguru, Laxmi becomes self-motivated personality. She got pain like other hijra suffers, here she made the difference. She lives her life as a queen. Many situations were hurdle for her but she made each problems her strength. That is how she has broken stereotype concept of this society. The study unfolds that how the stereotype society treats transgender and how a transgender Laxmi breaks a mould through her journey of success.

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