

Intersectionality in transgender autobiographies: A study of A. Revathi and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi

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Abstract

This paper examines the idea of intersectionality in transgender autobiographies focusing on the writings of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A. Revathi. The research explores the ways in which gender identity related with caste, class, patriarchy, social exclusion and cultural discrimination that influences transgender in Indian society. Kimberlee Crenshaws theory has been basis of my paper and it examines the different kinds of discrimination in these autobiographies. The paper shows the struggle that transgender people go through and they want people treated them with dignity and they have rights as others. By looking at these stories and the social issues surrounding them this is about the idea what is meaning of man or woman. It also emphasizes the challenges of identity, dignity, acceptance and human rights encountered by transgender community. The study concludes that intersectionality provides an important perspective for understanding the complex realities of marginalised identities in contemporary literature and society.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Marginalisation, Gender Identity, Transgender, Autobiography.

I. INTRODUCTION

Autobiography is more than a record of an individual life; it is also a narrative shaped by social power. When people whose identities have been marginalised write about themselves, autobiography can challenge the authority of institutions and communities that have historically spoken on their behalf. Transgender autobiographies are especially significant in this respect because they document the lived consequences of gender norms in family life, education, employment, public space, and intimate relationships. A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* place hijra experience at the centre of their narratives and make visible the emotional and material costs of social exclusion. The term 'hijra,' is

synonym to a word of abuse thereby weighing down hijras as the 'other' in society. Despite being human, hijras face marginalization due to their gender identity. It is intensified by the diverse cultural and linguistic representations of hijras in media and narratives. From 'khwaja sara' in Urdu to 'kinnar' in Hindi and 'aravani' in Tamil, highlight the different dimensions of their linguistic marginalization across regions (Tripathi 172). These two texts share a concern with self-definition, but their experiences are not identical. Revathi's narrative describes a difficult movement from childhood gender nonconformity through rejection, flight, and life within the hijra community. Tripathi's autobiography also recounts gendered stigma, but her family background, educational opportunities, performance career, and

public activism shape a different path. A comparative reading must therefore avoid presenting either author as representative of every transgender person. Their stories instead reveal how gender is experienced through other social relations and unequal distributions of resources.

This paper uses intersectionality as its central framework and gender performativity as a complementary lens. It asks how the authors narrate identity, family, social stigma, violence, livelihood, and public recognition; how their life circumstances differ; and how autobiographical writing challenges the cultural production of transgender people as outsiders. The argument is that the texts represent identity as a process negotiated within intersecting systems of power, while also presenting self-narration and activism as forms of agency.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw developed intersectionality to explain why experiences shaped by multiple structures of power cannot be adequately understood through a single category. In "Mapping the Margins," she argues that social and institutional frameworks can fail when they treat identities and forms of discrimination as separate rather than interconnected (Crenshaw). Applied to transgender autobiography, intersectionality makes it possible to consider gender alongside caste, class, family status, regional context, education, occupation, and access to public legitimacy. Intersectionality perpetuates a state of mind among transgender individuals that they are 'others'. They carry a sense of regret for not conforming to binary gender norms. The intertwining of multiple marginalized identities, such as gender nonconformity, familial roles and societal expectations, creates a complex web of oppression. In traditional and patriarchal societies, family honour and societal reputation often take precedence over individual identity (K 173). These factors do not affect every person in the same way, and the framework helps explain differences within marginalised communities as well as exclusion from dominant society.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a qualitative, comparative close-reading method. It treats the two autobiographies as

literary life narratives situated within broader social and cultural contexts. The analysis focuses on recurring themes: childhood and gender expression; family and belonging; public harassment and social stigma; caste, class, and livelihood; self-naming and community; and activism and human dignity. Theoretical concepts are used to interpret the narratives rather than to reduce the authors' experiences to abstract categories.

Childhood, Gender Expression, and Social Regulation

Both autobiographies show that gender nonconformity becomes socially consequential long before a person can fully explain or name their identity. In Revathi's account, childhood expressions associated with femininity are met with ridicule and correction. She experienced violence within the family and community and left home in order to live more truthfully. Her story makes clear that gender norms are enforced not only through formal rules but through everyday reactions: teasing, surveillance, shame, and the threat of punishment.

But my flamboyance on stage made some people uncomfortable. In patriarchal, misogynistic cultures such as ours, dancing is seen as a womanly pursuit. So, I was teased. People began to call me a homo and a chakka. They could not see the cathartic and therapeutic effect that my art had on me. All they could see was that though I was a man, my body language was that of a woman. (Tripathi 4)

These labels reduce a complex person to a degrading category. Their force lies in repetition: peers and adults teach the child that certain gestures and preferences are unacceptable. Read through Butler, such policing attempts to maintain a stable relationship between assigned sex, appearance, behaviour, and social role. Revathi's narrative, however, exposes the violence required to enforce that stability. An early passage reproduced in the book's published preview describes the abuse directed at Revathi and other hijras: 'Hey, Number 9!' and 'female boy' (Revathi 3). Tripathi's account similarly describes a childhood marked by uncertainty and the pressure to fit expectations of masculinity. The Oxford University Press description identifies her as having

been born into a high-caste Brahman household and describes the emotional turmoil she experienced before she came to identify as Laxmi. Her narrative demonstrates that family status does not remove gender-based stigma. Rather, caste location and family resources may shape the forms of support and the opportunities available to a person while leaving the pressure to conform intact. The comparison is important: the authors encounter related gender norms, but the social settings in which they negotiate those norms differ. Intersectionality therefore discourages a single, universal account of transgender childhood. It asks how social position changes the intensity, form, and consequences of rejection.

Family, Belonging, and Unequal Forms of Support

Family functions in both narratives as a site of conflict and potential support. For Revathi, family expectations become a source of pain when her gender expression is treated as a problem to be corrected. Leaving home becomes part of the search for safety and recognition, although departure also exposes her to new forms of insecurity. The narrative shows how the ideal of the respectable family can conceal coercion: a family may claim to protect its reputation while limiting the individual's freedom to live openly. Tripathi's experience is different in significant ways. Her family's social location and eventual support provide resources that are not equally available to everyone in the hijra community. This does not mean that she avoids discrimination; rather, her narrative reveals how support from family can influence access to education, work, mobility, and public life. A comparative intersectional reading must recognise this difference instead of assuming that all transgender people are rejected by their families in identical ways. The contrast demonstrates that family cannot be categorised simply as either oppressive or supportive. It may enforce normative expectations, yet it can also provide material and emotional resources. The question is how affection, social respectability, and gender conformity interact. In both texts, the struggle for identity is also a struggle over the conditions under which a person may remain connected to family and community without denying the self.

Public Harassment, Violence, and the Search for Dignity

Revathi's autobiography describes public scrutiny and harassment as part of everyday life. It records how people stare at hijras, question whether they are men or women, and make unwanted physical contact. The episode culminates in a question about whether hijras can live with dignity and earn a decent living. This passage connects symbolic humiliation to material inequality. Harassment is not merely an insult; it can restrict movement, employment, safety, and access to ordinary public life. The text also reveals the gendered and sexualised nature of this violence. The hijra body is treated as public property, open to interrogation and unwanted touch.

The first time I refused to have sex with Shashi's friends, they were upset and angry.

They cajoled me into acquiescing, and when that did not work, they blackmailed me.

The blackmailer scared me and I surrendered..... I dared them to touch me. It worked.

The boys put their trails between their legs, so to speak, and slipped away. (Tripathi 8)

The demand that a person explain or prove their gender makes everyday life a continuous test of legitimacy. Through an intersectional lens, the problem is not only prejudice against gender variance but the unequal power to decide who can occupy public space without fear. Tripathi's narrative also records stigma and abuse, but it places particular emphasis on transforming public visibility into a source of authority. In an interview about the title of her autobiography, Tripathi explains her self-definition in direct terms: 'I am Laxmi. I am myself' (Tripathi, interview). This statement is useful as evidence of her public self-representation, though it comes from an interview rather than the autobiography itself. It presents identity as something she claims rather than something granted by hostile observers. Her choice to embrace the term 'hijra' similarly turns a label used to shame into a name associated with dignity and political recognition.

The contrast between the authors is not a simple opposition between suffering and success. Both narratives represent vulnerability and agency. Revathi's account foregrounds the costs of exclusion and the search for a liveable future; Tripathi's public

activism shows how self-definition can become collective advocacy. Together, they demonstrate that dignity requires more than individual courage: it also depends on social conditions that make safety, livelihood, and recognition possible.

Caste, Class, Livelihood, and Social Mobility

Intersectionality is especially valuable when examining how caste and class shape transgender lives differently. Tripathi's Brahman family background is a significant part of the social context of her autobiography. It may provide forms of cultural and material capital unavailable to many other hijras, even as gender nonconformity exposes her to stigma. Her access to education, performance, travel, and activism complicates any assumption that all members of the community experience poverty or exclusion in exactly the same way. Revathi's narrative, by contrast, depicts the precariousness that can follow family rejection and the search for survival. The struggle to earn a living is inseparable from the social stigma attached to hijra identity. When formal employment and public respect are restricted, people may be pushed toward insecure work and dependence on community networks. These conditions should not be understood as natural features of transgender identity; they are outcomes of exclusion from social and economic opportunities. The comparison illustrates a key point in Crenshaw's framework: one category alone cannot explain the authors' experiences. Gender is central, but its effects are mediated by family resources, caste location, education, occupation, and social networks. Tripathi's relative access to certain opportunities does not cancel the discrimination she experiences; Revathi's greater vulnerability in some settings does not define every aspect of her agency. An intersectional reading holds these realities together without ranking one life as more authentic than the other.

Self-Naming, Community, and Resistance

Naming is a recurring political act in both autobiographies. The labels imposed on transgender people often carry histories of ridicule and exclusion. By narrating their lives in their own words, Revathi and Tripathi challenge the authority of outsiders to define them. Their autobiographies replace the gaze of curiosity with first-person knowledge and show that

identity includes memory, relationships, desire, work, and political choice.

Tripathi's title, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, places community identity and personal identity together. The title can be read as a refusal to choose between belonging to a hijra community and asserting an individual self. In an interview, she explains that she can occupy different roles in different relationships – daughter or son to her mother, sibling to her sister, disciple to her guru – without ceasing to be herself (Tripathi, interview). This flexible account of identity challenges the expectation that one label must explain the whole person. Revathi's title, *The Truth About Me*, similarly foregrounds first-person authority. The phrase 'about me' resists the tendency to make transgender people objects of medical, social, or sensational description. The autobiography does not merely ask readers to feel sympathy; it asks them to recognise a person who interprets her own experiences. In this sense, life writing becomes counter-discourse: it contests stereotypes by presenting a complex life rather than a simplified social category.

Community also has a double significance. Hijra networks can provide shelter, kinship, knowledge, and recognition when biological families and public institutions fail. At the same time, communities have their own hierarchies and expectations. A nuanced reading therefore avoids romanticising community as a perfect refuge. Both autobiographies suggest that belonging is negotiated and that self-determination remains important within as well as beyond community structures.

Gender Performativity and the Limits of the Binary

The narratives repeatedly show that gender is read through visible signs such as clothing, gestures, voice, names, and relationships. These signs are treated by others as proof of whether a person is properly masculine or feminine. Butler's theory helps explain why such ordinary acts become politically charged: gender norms are reproduced through repeated expectations and sanctions. The authors' lives reveal the consequences of refusing, revising, or moving beyond those expectations.

However, the autobiographies also challenge the assumption that the goal of every transgender life is simply to move from one fixed category to another.

Hijra identity has its own social, cultural, and communal meanings. Tripathi's public embrace of the term and Revathi's account of her search for a livable identity show that self-understanding can involve a relationship to community as well as individual gender expression. The binary model cannot fully account for these complex forms of identification. The texts also demonstrate that recognition is relational. A person may know who they are and still be denied recognition by family members, strangers, employers, or institutions. Self-definition is therefore necessary but not sufficient. Social dignity requires changes in the conditions under which people are treated as credible, safe, and entitled to participate in public life.

Autobiography, Voice, and Human Rights

The first-person form of autobiography is central to the political force of these texts. It makes visible experiences often filtered through the language of outsiders. Revathi's narrative records the effects of humiliation and violence in personal terms, while Tripathi's narrative connects self-acceptance with public activism. Their accounts turn private experiences into evidence of broader social patterns without erasing the individuality of the people who experience them.

These autobiographies can be read as contributions to debates about dignity, equality, and citizenship. They invite readers to consider whether rights are meaningful when people remain vulnerable to harassment, exclusion from work, or family coercion. Recognition cannot be reduced to symbolic inclusion or occasional public visibility. It must include access to education, health care, secure livelihoods, housing, legal protection, and freedom from violence.

The texts also make an ethical demand on readers. Rather than treating hijra lives as exceptional or sensational, they ask readers to examine the social systems that produce marginality. The autobiographical voice does not speak for every transgender person, but it creates a basis for listening to experiences that dominant narratives have often ignored.

III. CONCLUSION

A comparative reading of *The Truth About Me* and *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* shows that transgender identity

is shaped by intersecting social relations rather than by gender alone. Revathi's narrative foregrounds childhood stigma, familial conflict, public harassment, economic insecurity, and the search for dignity. Tripathi's narrative highlights the negotiation of identity within a high-caste family, the importance of support and social resources, and the conversion of visibility into activism. Both challenge the authority of dominant society to define hijra lives from the outside.

Crenshaw's intersectionality helps explain why the two authors share experiences of gendered marginalisation while differing in their access to family support, mobility, livelihood, and public recognition. Butler's theory of gender performativity further clarifies how everyday expectations regulate appearance and behaviour. Together, these frameworks reveal that identity is both personally claimed and socially contested. Ultimately, the autobiographies transform self-narration into resistance. They challenge stereotypes, recover agency, and insist that dignity is not a privilege to be granted by others but a condition of equal human existence. Their stories also remind readers that individual resilience cannot substitute for structural change. A society committed to equality must confront the intersecting forces that make transgender people vulnerable and create conditions in which diverse gender identities can live safely, openly, and with respect.

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