

# “Bottled in a Man’s Body”: Thinking over the Norms of Sexual and Gender Identities through the Eyes of A. Revathi and Manobi Bandopadhyay

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**Abstract-** Intolerance towards the queer is ingrained in institutions such as family, media, law and workplace. These institutions shape the thoughts and understanding of the society. Social intolerance towards the queer affects them in many ways. They are forced to conform to the normative ideal, failing which they are marginalised. Marginality usually leads to invisibility. The politics of gender and sexuality in contemporary India is largely based on the notion of “normative” and “alternative” identities; the “alternative” is often defined in negative terminologies. Most of us grow up believing the stereotypical notions often associated with *third gender* individuals. Considered to be habitual examples of societal menace and nuisance, the mainstream dominant gaze looks at them with disgust and contempt. This paper attempts to dismantle the borders of binary gender identity by analysing the two autobiographies – ‘*Truth About Me, The: A Hijra Life Story*’ (2011) by A. Revathi and ‘*A Gift of goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India’s First Transgender Principal*’ (2017) by Manobi Bandyopadhyay and aims to show that *hijras* are normal and ordinary people. Through the novels, the authors bring to light the discrimination they have gone through in their day to day life because of their gender identity. The inability to identify with fixed gender norms often makes a person undergo a sense of identity crisis, and one often begins to feel alienated from one’s own body. This paper attempts to reconstruct the image of *hijras* as ordinary human beings and strive to dispel the myth that *hijras* are subhuman.

**Index Terms** - Sexual Minorities, Normative, Stereotypes, Deviant, Queer

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The Individuality of Sexual minorities are very visible in India these days. Intolerance towards the queer is embedded in almost all the institutions such as family, media, law and workplace. It is these institutions that frame the thoughts and monitors the understanding of the society. Social intolerance towards the queer affects them in several ways. They are forced to conform to the normative ideal, failing which they are marginalised. Marginality usually leads to invisibility. Unfortunately, so far as the queer community is concerned, marginality in addition to their individuality also leads to their hyper-visibility as “deviants”. They are portrayed as “hyper-visible subjects” worthy of contempt; ‘the ‘visibility’ of the normal queer citizen gets transfigured into the hyper-visibility of the queer ‘deviant’” (Narain, *Despised Sexuality*. p- 7). The very term “queer” here encompasses the complex diversity of identities of sexual minorities. For a person identifying oneself as queer signifies a deeply felt sense of personal identity. At the same time, it also becomes a conscious defiant political stand. It rejects the idea of a patriarchal heterosexual family. It also challenges the notion of compulsory heterosexuality. Queer reflects a different understanding of sexuality which moves beyond the strict boundaries of heterosexuality.

*To speak of queer politics is, in some sense, different from just speaking of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, kothi, and hijra communities. Queer politics does not speak only of the issue of those communities as a ‘minority issue’, but*

*instead it speaks of larger understandings of gender and sexuality in our society that affect all of us, regardless of our sexual orientation.*

(Narain, "Crystallising Queer". p- 457).

The term "queer" encompasses identities that go beyond the notion of sexuality. It argues for creating a space where different forms of identities can be equally recognised and accepted. The attitude towards homosexuality is perhaps changing with some countries accepting homosexuality as a natural variation of human sexuality.

*According to current scientific and professional understanding, however, the core feelings and attractions that form the basis for adult sexual orientation typically emerge between middle childhood and early adolescence. Moreover, these patterns of sexual attraction generally arise without any prior sexual experience.*

( In "Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi and Others"P-56)

It demonstrated that homosexuality is not a mental illness or disease that could be "cured" or "treated." It also documented that people with homosexual inclinations were not psychologically dysfunctional or impaired.

Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt sense of individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the gender assigned at birth ("NALSA v. Union of India and others". P- 15-16). Sexual orientation refers to an "individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person" (NALSA v. Union of India and others".P-16). Gender identity and sexual orientation are two different concepts and a person's self- identified gender identity and sexual orientation are integral to one's identity.

*Hijra* is a term used for transgender individuals, specifically in South Asia. As is apparent, identity of any individual or community includes many dimensions such as class, caste, religion, kinship, profession etc. Thus the term *hijra* does not denote just sexual or gender identity. Identification of *hijra* individuals specifically referring to their gender is reductionist in its approach. There is a range of elements that forms the identity of a *hijra*. One of them that identify a *hijra* is the family system. *Hijras* have their own traditional concept of kinship. Family for *hijra* is usually defined in terms of their relationship with other *hijras*. They prefer community kinship over blood relationships. Most of them believe that it is their *hijra* family which will look after them rather than their natal family. The family bond in a *hijra* community is based on the notion of care, which is charted out on temporal and spatial existence.

*The naiks called the jamaat to order and announced loudly for everyone to hear that Revathi was being made a chela of such- and- such chela of such- and – such parivar. At this, all present clapped their hands. I was asked to do paampaduthi to all the elders. They call it reeth, this system of consecrating chelas. After the ceremony was over, I was handed a set of clothes and a box to keep these, as well as my own bed-roll. I was told where to store it. My guru then explained hijra kin terms to me:*

- *Badudaadi- great-grandmother's guru*
- *Daadaguru- grandmother's guru(great-grandmother)*
- *Nanaguru- guru's guru(grandmother)*
- *Guru- mother*
- *Kaalaguru- guru's sister*
- *Gurubai-(my) sister*

- *Badagurubai- elder sister*
- *Chotagurubai- younger sister*
- *Chela- daughter*
- *Naathi- chela- granddaughter*
- *Chandichela- great- granddaughter*
- *Sadak- naathi- great- granddaughter's daughter*

(The Truth About Me, The: A Hijra Life Story. P- 791)

It hinges on the idea of being together at the same time and in the same place rather than on blood relationships and marriage. The *hijra* kinship structure undermines the biological tie as the only valid and permanent tie, by presenting the *guru- chela* association as equally permanent and enduring. Every *hijra* is initiated into the *hijra* community by undergoing a *rit* (initiation ceremony) into the *hijra* household. Novice *hijra* as *chelas* can choose the *gurus*. The *guru- chela* relationship is central to the *hijra's* conception of family where the *guru* enacts the role of mother, father, and brother to the *chela*. *Chelas* are expected to be respectful to the *guru* and serve in all possible ways. In return the *gurus* are expected to take care of the health and well-being of their *chela or chelas*. In case the *chela* is abused by the *guru* or is unhappy with the *guru*, the *chela* can change her *guru*. Seniority of a *hijra* is decided on the basis of the time spent in the *hijra* community and by the acquiring of *chelas*.

The *Guru* is also responsible for the *chela's nirvana* (sex change) operation. The hierarchy followed in a *hijra* household includes *nayak* (senior leader) and there is only one *nayak* in a household who looks into any kind of dispute occurring within the community.

Popular perception identifies “any and every “cross-dressed”” person on the street as a *hijra*: “his simple reductionism does not really reflects the range of identities that crosscuts this space and the plurality of differences that go into constructing these individuals’ lives” (Reddy. p- 58). Any person appearing to be a *hijra* is not necessarily a *hijra*. There is a wide range of transgender identities:

1. *Hijra*-Mostly they wear saris and look like men. They undergo *nirvana* (sex change) operation. They are identified as women, or “in- between man and woman”, or “neither man nor woman”.
2. *Kothi*- They are often seen as men with varying degrees of femininity. They live with their natal family and come together only on specific occasions.
3. *Jogtas/Jogappas*- These are the devotees of Goddess Yallamma. “*Jogta*’ refers to male servant of that Goddess and ‘*Jogti*’ refers to female servant”(NALSA v. Union of India and other”.P-49). *Jogtas* and *Jogtis* are heterosexuals who may cross-dress while worshipping the Goddess.
4. *Shiva- Shakthis*- These are the men who get possessed by the Goddess often early in their childhood. They are said to be born this way. They are “married to a sword that represents male power or Shiva (deity)” (NALSA v. Union of India and other. P-49). Occasionally, they are cross- dress.

Sexual minorities were not in any way considered to be a threat to society. *Kama Sutra* written by Vatsyayana is considered to be a seminal treatise on human sexuality, behaviour and practices. It has been translated by Alan Danielou titled *The Complete Kama Sutra* (1993). It describes that “[p]eople of the third sex (*tritiya- prakriti*) are of two kinds, according to whether their appearance is masculine or feminine” (Wilhelm. P- 19). What one needs to understand is that the laws regarding homosexuality in ancient India did not prohibit homosexuality very vehemently. It was an act of intercourse that was penalised. It is in contrast to the legal set up today in India where the focus is on the homosexual individual and not just the act of intercourse. The Vedic society treated sexual minorities as part and parcel of everyday life. As sexual minorities were part and parcel of society, society was familiar with their characteristic features. Since society was accommodative every one could grow as adult in a healthy environment. However, today even parents fail to recognise the difference in sexual orientation and gender identity of their offspring. They force their children to conform to the norms. If a child fails to conform to the norms laid out by society it affects the child psychologically. It also creates a fear of becoming a disappointment to the parents. In childhood, such children often become the subject of mockery in school. They are also ostracised by society while growing into adulthood. They are shunned by family, relatives as also by society and at the same time are under the threat of criminal prosecution. Such social marginalisation is the result of ignorance. The failure to accept difference leads to violence and hatred towards any deviance from the norms.

*My colleagues still treated me like I was subhuman, like I had no rights to sit with them in the same staffroom and enjoy the same facilities as they did as college professors* (A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi. P- 1717).

The theme of the paper deals with an attempt to dismantle the borders of binary gender identity. The subject of the paper is the novels: *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by A. Revathi and Manobi Bandyopadhyay's *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal* (2017).

*The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* is an autobiographical account of A. Revathi, writer and *hijras* right activist. Originally written in Tamil, it has been translated into English by V Geetha. It portrays the extreme pain and sufferings *hijras* experience in their lives. The narrative begins with Revathi's childhood. The child Revathi/ Doraisamy loves to wear girl's clothes and do women's chores. It feels natural for Doraisamy to behave like a girl. But the elder boys would often tease and call him “girl-boy.” Still, Doraisamy feels attracted to those boys who were good to him. His attraction to boys creates a sense of confusion within him towards his own gender identity. Doraisamy desires to be recognised as a woman. Due to the stifling desire within him to live as a woman, he runs away from home in his early childhood and joins the *hijra* community. After joining the *hijra* community Doraisamy transforms into Revathi. As a *hijra* with no other option to earn his livelihood, Revathi is forced to beg and do sex work. Looked at with disgust *hijras*, are often left to fend for themselves. They are not inducted even for menial jobs. Revathi looks for jobs but everywhere she is shown the way back to the door. Only because she is a *hijra* she is also denied the rightful claim to her family property. Revathi writes that she did not come with a mission to become a *hijra*. She did not choose to be born a *hijra*. For no fault of hers she has to bear the pain society inflicts on her. Not just society but also her own family members treat Revathi very brutally.

With the help of her *chelas* Revathi finds a job in Sangama, an NGO working in Bangalore, to challenge the stereotypes and wrong perceptions about sexual minorities. She begins to advocate for the acceptance of transgenders in society as equals. Even here she is criticised for speaking out loud her traumatic experiences of victimisation by society. However, by the end of the autobiography, Revathi is confident about her identity as a transgender.

The other novel *Manobi Bandyopadhyay's A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal* is an autobiography of a transgender. Manobi as Somnath during his childhood would often put on her sister's clothes and admire herself. Her parents would ignore such activities as being childish. Manobi is often ridiculed for behaving like a girl. Her father tries not to acknowledge the change in Manobi's behaviour that is very easily visible to others. Her mother would try in vain to make her understand.

The narrative is an account of Manobi's painful journey. She is appointed as a lecturer in Vivekananda Satavarshiki Mahavidyalaya in Jhargram, West Bengal. In this college she suffers not just mental but also physical violence. That a transgender person can become a lecture is unbelievable for most people. She becomes the principal of Krishnagar Women's College, West Bengal. Even as the principal of a college, her dominant identity remains that of a transgender. Such identification is reductive in nature. At every stage of her life she faces discrimination for being a transgender. For most people Manobi is a transgender principal and not just the principal of a college.

These autobiographies have created their centre in the peripheral space accorded to them by society. Just like their autobiographies they are also the authors of their own lives. They assert their "deviant" identity and do not enter into a facade of denial. The autobiographies also endeavour to show that *hijras* are "normal" and ordinary people going about their lives like every other person. These narratives attempt to deconstruct the stereotypical images that have been constructed about transgender individuals. The narratives also question the norm of binary gender identity. Through the autobiographies the authors bring to light the discrimination they have gone through in their day to day life because of their different gender identity.

The first time Doraisamy and Somnath realised that they were attracted to boys, they were confused. Doraisamy wonders how a man can fall in love with another man. They wondered if such attraction makes them homosexual. Revathi writes: "I felt drawn to the boys who did not tease me, and I imagined I was in love with them. This confused me- I was a boy and yet I felt I could love other boys. Was this right or wrong" (Revathi. P- 140). However, Somnath knew and was convinced that he was a girl and not a homosexual: "I knew that just like the girls of my age, I was attracted to men and wanted them as my partners. So how was I not heterosexual" (Bandyopadhyay. P- 390).

The inability to identify with fixed gender norms often makes a person undergo a sense of identity crisis. A body can be said to qualify as a human body only when it conforms to the norms of binary gender. Such identities that do not fit into the construct of binary gender are constructed as inhuman. Under such circumstances, living like a man when one feels like a woman, becomes a kind of everyday role playing for a transgender person.

*"Who was I? Why was my body different from my soul or was I mistaking my identity? Why was I born this way? Was it some past karma for which I was being made to pay so dearly"*(Bandyopadhyay. P-389).

The failure to reproduce the gender norms of society can create a sense of confusion towards one's own self. Such moments of identity crisis, when one is unsure of one's gender identity comes in the life of almost every transgender person. The identity of an individual cannot be determined in monolithic terms. Identity is determined by different intersecting factors such as race, class, age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, profession etc. In addition to these different factors, stereotypes associated with a particular group of people, too, determine identity. Stereotypes associated with a particular group of people, too, determine identity. Stereotypes aid the universalization of the norms of binary gender identity. Such universalization, in turn, provides legitimacy to stereotypes. Stereotypes also act as an important mode of



representation as they have the tendency of reducing and categorising the “other” into a fixed entity. It saves society from giving equal recognition to several diverse identities simultaneously present in society. The authors of the two autobiographies- Revathi and Manobi deconstruct the established norm of binary gender identity. They appropriate and dismantle the stereotypical notions, established over decades, which have come to define the transgender community.

Manobi knew that it was only education that could liberate her from the miserable life that she was forced to live for being “different”. She writes: “Somehow, I did not let my awakening sexuality affect my intellect; I would work hard to stay at the top of my class... win this unequal fight” (Bandyopadhyay. P- 164). Revathi too, like Manobi, advocated and fought for equal rights for sexual minorities. She joined Sangama, an NGO working for sexual minorities. Initially, Revathi’s *guru* discouraged her from joining Sangama. But on seeing Revathi’s resolve her *guru* soon relented. Revathi also faced resistance from society in her efforts to reclaim her space. She was questioned by society. Some of her male friends expressed astonishment that Revathi was able to “bear to give such interviews” (Revathi. P- 2947). She replied: “I did what I did not to shame myself, but to uproot the notions that people like them held about us, hijras” (Revathi. P- 2947). It was working with Sangama that gave Revathi the confidence to speak up about the discrimination that she had suffered for choosing to live as a *hijra*.

Violence against *hijras* has a social angle too. Violence against them is also carried out in terms of the denial of benefits offered by the government. though in its landmark judgement, the Supreme Court of India on 15th April 2014 declared that the *hijras* and the other apart from binary gender must be treated as “third gender” for the purpose of safeguarding their rights under Part III of our constitution and the laws made by the Parliament and the State Legislature. Still, the discrimination against transgender continues. Those who are given the responsibility of providing social services, too, are often prejudiced towards transgender persons. In order to attain the benefits of the services provided by the government, transgender persons are supposed to educate the services provider of their “ambiguous” identity. The needs of this community are often not recognised by most people.

Every person wants to lead a “normal” life. But what happens when a person’s way of being or desire becomes an alternative way of life. Any such alternative that does not conform to the norm is labelled as “abnormal” and “deviant” by the normative society. One becomes an outsider and feels agitated. However, what one should understand is, often when society “defines and evaluates something as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, it has nothing to do with the immanent quality of the things/ event but is the ascription of value by the community to the thing/event” ( Nayar. P- 117). As Manobi writes, “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” (Manobi. P- 1993). Often homosexual individuals are stereotypically constructed as “abnormal”. Their different sexual orientation is considered to be unnatural. The mainstream society, the dominant heterosexual group, imposes normative sexual identities on homosexual individuals. Homosexuality is often associated with filth and disease.

The present study attempts to deconstruct the normative discourse of binary gender and heterosexuality. It also questions the constructed- ness of such discourse that naturalise and legitimise the norms. An individual with a different gender identity and sexual orientation may be seen as just one flower blossoming among a hundred different flowers, each with its own distinctive identity.

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