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GENDER IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE IN REVATHI'S *TRUTH ABOUT ME*

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Abstract

Patriarchal societal norms often react violently to what it considers a transgressive act within its socio-cultural domain. The heteronormative (Rogers *et al*, 2013) sexual identity is also a patriarchal construct. Consequently, the existence of the third gender or transgender draws severe reaction from the socio-cultural bipolar gender consciousness. A Revathi's Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story is an instance of it. This paper presents a glimpse of the way society tries to reject, suppress and annihilate the identity of the transgender self which is not approved by its patriarchal orientation. In doing so, this paper aims at exposing a greater malaise in society, that of, colonial prejudice for establishing uniformity that conforms to the patriarchal and colonial standards.

Keywords: Transgender identity, violence, Alienation, Heteronormative

1. Introduction

The journey that transsexuality has to traverse in a culturally rigid society like India often makes *hijras* encounter patriarchal violence both in physical and psychological forms. Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2015) is a pioneering initiative in this regard since this autobiography has proved to be a great awareness generating force in understanding the process of forming the transgender self (Ramos, 2018). The Autobiography presents a transgender who narrates her own story of struggle towards achieving her individual identity. In this process Revathi achieves the dual success of establishing her identity and becoming the agency of her community. Still Revathi's gender identity is shaped through a process of violence, oppression, humiliation and alienation which make her embrace a journey that becomes possible only for her strong determination.

2. Psychological barrier

Revathi's *Truth about Me* is a treatise of the challenges transgender face in their day-to-day existence. She records her journey through a series of psychological and physical harassments inflicted by the society. Revathi's life reveals how the transgender are victimized not only by the society, but also by their family. But she fights against all odds and humiliation to stay true to her third sex identity.

In the preface to her autobiography Revathi mentions "As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of society." (Revathi, 2015) This process of alienation starts when Revathi is insulted in school as "Number 9, female thing, female boy." As Doraisamy, Revathi is caned for not being brave like a boy. The PT teacher would box Doraisamy's ears and would threaten to pull his trousers down to check. The other boys laugh when Doraisamy has to go through

this bullying. When Doraisamy dances dressed as a woman in Mariamman festival, people follow her hurling insults as 'female thing.'

As Doraisamy takes the bold step to enter the community of transgender, she faces violence and humiliation of larger dimension. As Revathi travels to Erode and Delhi she experiences physical humiliation. People would stare at her. Men would take the liberty of touching them on waists or shoulders. Some even would ask whether they have real breasts. Constant staring and winking, expletives hurled are the abuses the transgender have to go through as they try to find a place in the society.

3. Physical barrier

Revathi has also to go through physical violation from family members, society and also from the transgender community. Her first visit to her home from Delhi makes her face severe violence from her family members. She narrates her middle brother's reaction in Chapter six of the autobiography:

"As soon as I stepped in, he shut the door, grabbed a cricket bat, and began hitting me, all the while screaming, 'That'll teach you to go with those Number 9s.'"

Even Revathi's mother display brutality severe enough to shock the mother-child bond:

"That's right. Beat him and break his bones. Only then will he stay at home and not run away."

Revathi encounters violence even when she works as a sex worker. Chapter twelve presents a graphic description of the suffering Revathi goes through when she is brutally assaulted by a rowdy.

"He spat abuse at me and forced me into the act. When I screamed in pain and yelled for my guru, he shut my mouth with one of his hands, whipped out a knife with the other and threatened to take it to my throat."

The transgender's effort for survival is further made challenging the brutality inflicted upon by them the police:

'who are beaten with whips and lathis and stamped upon by police, had electric current run through their bodies, who could only leave after paying the police a hefty bribe.'

Revathi's *Truth about Me* presents many instances of such physical humiliation on transgender only because they choose to shape their own gender identity.

4. Gender identity

Identity crisis is an important and the most pertinent issue in Revathi's *Truth about Me*. Transgender people are those who have a gender identity that differs from their assigned sex (Dutta and Roy, 2014). The heteronormative gender norms approve of only male and female identities. Societal spaces allow entry to these identities. But Revathi illustrates several incidents when she faces severe difficulty in having access to public toilets. She does not fit into the socially acceptable gender binary of male and female. In Chapter Six, at Salem bus stand, Ravathi is shooed away from both male and female toilets. Through several such episodes, Revathi exposes the society's inability to respect the identity of transgender.

Born as the youngest male sibling in the family of three brothers and a sister, A Revathi is initially baptized as Doraisamy. But when she return to Namakkar after her *nirvaanam* in Chapter 13 (Revathi, 2015), a problem arises as to how people should address her. She lifts her sari, reveals herself to her brother in anger and asks "So Tell me am I a woman or a man?" She demands at the next door neighbor should call her a 'dai' instead of Doraisamy. But the society is not ready to respond to her demand of recognizing her new self or identity. This shows that the transgender has only epistemological existence and no ontological existence in the binary gender system.

Revathi enumerates several incidents to show how the society mocks at the identity of the transgender. Even during school days, humiliating terms like "Number 9, female thing, female boy" are hurled at Doraisamy. In Chapter 13 (Revathi, 2015), while travelling in a bus, college students use expressions like 'What about the Bus Numbre 9?'

'What's the time? Nine da.' Through these episodes Revathi exposes the society's inability to develop a fellow feeling towards the third gender.

Another aspect that Revathi touches is the failure of social customs to give transgender economic identity. During her stay at home in Chapter 16, Revathi goes on looking for work in STD booths, in grocery stores, textile shops. No one would keep her for any job. Instead each gives reasons revealing the society's prejudice towards transgender community. They say that Revathi would ruin all the boys. They say that Revathi is only fit for dancing on the roads. Such humiliation by society forces a transgender like Revathi to beg or to go for flesh trade.

5. Conclusion

Revathi's gender identity also comes in the way when the family property is divided among the siblings. It is due to her transgender status Revathi is deprived of parental property and only on lakh five thousand rupees is given to her. Thus, Revathi faces humiliation and oppression at every stage of her struggle. Through these episodes she exposes the society's insensitivity to the identity of the transgender community.

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