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RECREATING IDENTITIES THROUGH ART: AN ANALYSIS OF THE AGENCY OF DANCE
IN *ME HIJRA, ME LAXMI*

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ABSTRACT

Art has an important role in influencing the culture of a society. It is capable of recreating culture. This paper endeavours to study the role of dance in influencing the attitude of people towards a hijra based on Laxmiarayan Tripathi's autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. She is a flamboyant transgender rights activist who has a post graduate degree in bharatanatyam. Laxmi says, although she now is a full time activist, it was dance that made her feel that she was also a part of mainstream society. In this paper I am trying to analyse how dance acted as an agency in recreating her hijra identity.

Key Words: Culture, Society, Hijra, Identity, Activist, Dance, Recreation, Autobiography

Art influences society by changing opinions, instilling values and translating experiences across space and time. The role of art has not at all been negotiable in sustaining the cultural values, identity, unity and uniqueness of nations, races, religions as well as ethnic groups. Hijra is a community which has always been associated with begging, singing, dancing and sex work. "The word 'hijra' derived from Urdu word 'hijar'. A hijar is a person who has walked out of his tribe or community. Thus, a hijra is one who has left mainstream society, comprising men and women, and joined a community of hijras. But the hijra Community isn't a monolith. Its history and culture varies from state to state" (Tripathi 171). Though it is so we couldn't see much change in the attitude of people towards hijras. They are always being looked at as freaks of nature.

Hijras are born as male children biologically. Psychologically, however, they feel they are female. Sexually, they are

attracted not to the opposite sex, but to their own sex. This conflict between their biological, and psychological and sexual identities is borne out by their body language- their gestures, mannerisms, movements and expressions all belong to girls rather than boys.(172)

Hijras enjoy special position in Hindu mythology and Muslim history as well. But this position did not bring any kind of good luck for them after they were overthrown by the British rulers. These people are shunned by their family and Society too.

It is in this context that the life of Laxminarayan Tripathi, a hijra, divaricates from the accustomed life of hijras. She has written with immense delectation in her autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* about the role of dance in elevating her life to the mainstream level. Laxmi being brought up as a boy, says that it was his sister who gave him the

first dancing lessons and moulded at him as a dancer. Due to his fragile health condition Laxmi had to stay always inside the house. But it did not prove a damper for Laxmi's love for dance. The stage exerted hypnotic effect on him. He used to forget himself and dance to frenzy. In patriarchal, misogynistic culture such as ours, dancing is seen as a womanly pursuit. People started teasing him for being womanly. He knew that his mannerisms, walking and talking style were all feminine. But he was not of the age to understand the reason behind that.

It is the dance teacher Baby Johnny, whom he considers as the ladder that helped him to climb the peaks of fame as a dancer. He figured out that dancing was like oxygen for him and made him forget his ailments. According to his teacher's ideals a dancer should be a dancer both on and of the stage. "A dancer's movement must always be graceful, even when she is walking on the street" (24). These words got deeply engraved in his mind and when he became a hijra he was showered with compliments on his attire and personality in general. She taught him many other important lessons of life. "She taught me how to be myself, without compromising on my dignity and self respect. You also learnt that if one has to be respected by others one has to first respect oneself" (25).

Inspired by Baby Johnny he started his dance class when he was in VIIIth standard. Along with teaching in his own dance school he started going to other schools to teach. "I loved winning prizes, for they gave me they gave my self esteem a boost. Thus I enrolled my name for whatever dance competitions I got to know of" (26). Once he happened to experience an injustice during an inter-school dance competition. He reacted vehemently to that injustice. That incidence made him hypersensitive towards injustice. Today he has extra sharp sensors to detect injustice happening around him..

He started going to clubs and dance parties. For him dancing was a therapy in his adverse life situations. Dance gave chances to meet people with same wavelength. Soon he realised that

dancing feminized his body. It was Vaishali Samant's album *Lavani on Fire* which made people recognise him as a dancer. When the dancers sent by him couldn't handle the intricate steps of the dance, Vaishali asked him to dance in the album. Once he entered the world of glamour, he started experiencing a change in the attitude of people. "I noticed that in the world of glamour, no one looks at me with a curious eye, as they did in the world outside" (33).

Very soon, through some of his friends, Laxmi got introduced to the world of bar dancing. He was a bar dancer for 4 years and 11 months and his only priority was money. He was fond of costumes, cosmetics and ornaments like girls of his age and he needed money for the same. It is then that he came to know about hijras from one of his friends Shabina. "The word 'hij' refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called Hijra"(39). He could assimilate with them. Though the society looks at hijras with a kind of aversion, they themselves have an elevated view about themselves. "God loves the hijra community and has created a special place for it outside the man-woman frame. A hijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman" (40). Thus the pronoun 'he' now changes to 'she', that is Laxmi has joined the hijra community after performing the christening ceremony called *reet*.

Dance is an unavoidable practice in the life of a hijra. We have seen the plight of hijras in Kamala Das poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs". The poem tells that we will not get any kind of aesthetic pleasure on seeing the dance of hijras. According to one of the critics the dance of the eunuchs has been used as "the objective correlative of suppressed desires" (Datta 20). There is no wonder in this matter; hijras are always associated with dance. Dance is their only modest way to earn money compared to other menial jobs like sex work or begging. "We supplement our earning by begging on city streets and going to shops. We also do sex work and dance in bars and night clubs. Dancing comes naturally to us hijras" (156).

Once she got into the hijra community she started working against the injustices faced by hijras

in the society. She became the chairman of the organisation DWS. she started attending conferences, workshops etc. "I felt empowered and the empowerment is not a word that normally occurs in the vocabulary of a hijra" (62-63). In this context she decided to leave her disputable past as a bar dancer. Soon her status raised as a hijra activist and speaker. She is eulogising dance for this achievement too. "As a dancer, I was a performer, and now I was performing here as well as delivering my lines and gauging the response of my audience" (64). Then came the important event - the announcement by the home minister that all dance bars in Maharashtra would be closed. She actively participated in protests for saving dance bars, which once she was a part of.

The next turning point in her life was the movie *Between the Lines*. Being the heroine of the movie she became a celebrity hijra. Dance gave her chances to visit many countries. She conducted dance workshops in European countries since it was popular there and they found it very exotic. The Amsterdam Indian festival gave a huge break to the hijra dance group. They really got a standing ovation for their dance performance. It was a time when Laxmi was equally active in art and activism. She is even finding a relation between the art and activism. "In both, there is an expression of personal feelings as well as a message. Both change things, dismantle the status quo. If world is a stage, art entertains while activism teaches" (104).

Laxmi also presents the pathetic situation of hijras in our community. After travelling worldwide, she understood that when transgender are found in every coveted profession in New York, be it medicine, law or IT, here they end up as a bar dancer or street player. Being a hijra Laxmi reached to her present heights only because of her dance and activism. She considers the dance as the stepping stone of her successes. We have seen that she is even finding similarities with dance and oration and even activism. It was such abilities of her made her different from other hijras. She could change the aversion of the people to admiration. Thus dance could create an aura around her hijra identity and could recreate the culture.

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