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Writing Their Own Stories By Challenging Gender Roles: An Observation of Revathi, Vidya And David Reimer's Choices

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Abstract

Traditional gender roles and their repetitive performativity form the basic structure of a stable heteronormative society. It is mainly in the voices of transgenders and transsexuals themselves, where we can find the hollowness of these given presumptions. My reading of *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi; *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Vidya and *As Nature Made Him: The Boy who was Raised as a Girl* by David Reimer is an endeavour to raise the emergent issues of sex/gender binaries, identity politics and predominant social and medical discourses that consider heterosexuality as a regulative strategy – denying social justice to the gender benders. While Revathi and Vidya have self-consciously decided to become members of the hijra clan by undergoing excruciating surgery to lose their 'manhood', David /Brenda's fate, after a fatal accident in infancy, has been decided upon by the medical team headed by Dr. John Money. I have in fact juxtaposed Revathi and Vidya with David to show how even on cross-cultural platforms the dominant heterosexual normativity plays decisive role in one's sexual orientation and social identity. And therefore to transcend artificially constructed gender regulations one requires extraordinary courage and perseverance to fight against the indignities burdened by the society. These true stories urge us to break free from biasness and esteem the choices made by transgenders and transsexuals and allow them to live the life with respect and dignity.

Key words: heteronormativity, gender identity, alternative sexuality.

Article

The discourses on sexuality and alternate sexualities have grown in volumes in recent times. Today we understand that sex is biologically given whereas gender is a socially constructed category. But the idea of what it means to be 'masculine' or 'feminine' has grown out of some rigid heteronormative conventions. Gender segregation and social policing negate the very notion of pluralizing gender and sexual identities. Thus the one who tends to transgress or bypass the pre-given or socially determined gender roles is deemed not only to be an 'Other' but also isofficially 'criminalized', until recently in India.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*¹ underlines the fact that "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of the substance, of a natural sort of being." Therefore we may consider a transgender as a person who not only openly challenges the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality by performing the opposite set of gender roles but even creates a democratic space where s/he establishes a new emerging identity for oneself. Regendering oneself is thus rewriting one's own destiny and from this point of view I would like to take up Revathi, Vidya and David Reimer's accounts of painful yet successful journeys of attaining the life of dignity by arriving at their "true" identities. Two truly heart rendering autobiographical accounts of A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*² and Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*³ here are taken up by me. According to J. Jaffery⁴ hijras form the most important recognizable and identifiable sexual minority group in India. They form

a rather large visibly 'invisible' group in the Indian social context. However there are varieties of terms used today to describe the permutations and combinations of same-sex behaviour, orientation and identity. Hijras come under the transgender (TG) umbrella term 'MSM' or men having sex with men. The term 'hijra' commonly denote those born as males with normal male genitalia, but who in the course of time come to think of themselves as women or a 'third' gender.⁵ It is found that only a minor percentage of hijra are intersexual and a large proportion of them voluntarily get rid of their male external genitals through the ritualistic process called "nirvaanam". I would like to underline the very challenge taken up by Revathi to assert her sexual preferences and clarify that her choice does not make her some sort of criminal but she is one who is denied of her basic "...rights in the name of sex, sexuality, caste and religion...and show that [we]hijras do have the right to live in this society." (Revathi,2010,p.ii). After joining NGO called Sangama, she began to realize that how the world had snatched away her rights and made it extremely difficult to earn her living except by begging and doing sex work. Revathi knew that she was different. Especially as a young adolescent boy Doraisamy (Revathi's boyhood name) realized that he was a "...woman trapped in a man's body" but he did not dare cross the rigid boundary of heteronormativity and thus "...longed to be known as a woman and felt the pain of being considered a man. I longed to be with men, but felt shamed by this feeling." (Revathi,2010,p.15). That she wished to embrace the life, mannerisms, behavioural patterns of what the society consider as given feminine characteristics made her confused and her life with her biological family became intolerable. Eventually casting aside the traumatic life of "girl-boy" behind she left Salem. She accepted the life of the "social outcasts" and started living with her guru mata and naniat J.J Colony, Delhi.

Though historical evidences in India clearly suggest the tolerance towards third gender ranging from the Vedic ages in the epics, the medical treatises (like the Kamasutra) and erotic temple carvings of same-sex love to the Medieval age. Things changed during the Colonial Period. Legal approaches tried to exterminate homosexual behaviour. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860 prescribed imprisonment for voluntary carnal intercourse as "against the order of nature" and was interpreted to prevent homosexual associations. Acts such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 officially "criminalized" eunuchs, as they had come to be termed.⁶

Living life at a hijra colony officially labeled Revathi as a deviant. But she enjoyed her stay there, before performing "nirvaanam" and attaining the cherished identity of being a woman she learnt the mannerisms of a woman and expected feminine gestures. She had to wear sari, talk and walk like a woman balancing water pots on heads, do household chores at nani's house, and these human actions brought supreme happiness in her "[I AM NOT] a man now. I am a woman and I have a family with a mother, a grandmother, and sister-in-law." (Revathi,2010,p.43).

Revathi became not only a deviant but also a criminal legally. And thus to earn livelihood she accepted the life of a beggar and a "doli-badaai" singer. Spurned by the society at large no regular sources of income are available for hijras. They are just entertainment factors enjoyed and rejected by the Indian public. After attaining "nirvanaam", Revathi started to search for better job opportunities in Mumbai under a new guru mata but that led her to sex work.

The harassments she faced as a MSM detail the life of many other hijras who face indiscriminate police molestations, violence, social apathy and indignities. Voicing her protests she cries out "[H]ow much longer can we live in fear? Don't we deserve to live free? Do we not want people to think differently about us? Don't we all want the violence to end or, least decrease?" (Revathi, 2010, p. 245-6). Revathi's wedding to an unnamed male co-worker at Sangama (though same sex marriages are still illegal in India) points to her final acceptance of the feminine gender roles. Like a conventional Indian wife she would wait for him to return home, share meals

together, wash his clothes, and wear a “thali” as a mark of validated marriage. The marriage ended in a year. But finally leaving the life of a hapless woman, Revathi managed to complete her autobiography *UnarvumUruvamum* in Tamil and now leads her life as a writer, actor and activist based in Bengaluru. Unlike Revathi, Vidya is not only telling a story but documenting her dissent against Indian legal set-up. Her protesting voice can be heard from every line of her autobiography *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. With her medical certificate stating that she had undergone male to female sex change operation in Pune, she fought tooth and nail to re-register her name, apply for Voter Card, Ration Card, however fruitlessly. Her demands reiterate Revathi's, though even more vehemently. She says “[All] I want is legal approval and recognition that will enable us to walk freely in public? Why can't we legalize the sex change operation, when ‘tiranangai’ cannot be what they are- when they cannot change nature?” (Revathi, 2010, p.137). It is after such long and hard struggle the Supreme Court of India's passed the verdict in 2013 recognizing and guaranteeing the natural rights inherent to all its citizens extended to the transgender also. It endeavors to state that it will value “...privacy, self-identity, autonomy and personal integrity” as “fundamental rights guaranteed to members of the transgender community under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India and the State is bound to protect and recognize those rights.”⁷

Vidya resented the life she led from her birth. Her desire to “...break free of the maleness” made her leave her studies and desire to pursue doctoral studies in Dramatics. She left her bright career to become a kothi. Even her friends stressed the importance of education and warned her about social disapproval advising that “[You] are a man, remain a man” (Vidya, 2013, p.63). However in Vidya's own words experiences after having her “nirvana” operation “...was akin to spring cleaning-like cleaning an old house, removing the cobwebs and dust, swabbing the floors and whitewashing the walls. My woman's body no longer had a male protuberance” (Vidya, 2013, p.104). Sharing Revathi's fate, Vidya too had to beg in markets and railway stations. Her outrage against the unsympathetic society that considers a transgender, an object of ridicule, redefined her courage to fight against such injustices with her work. Although she still could not legally change herself to Vidya from Saravan at the end of the book her challenge to change the outlook of the male dominated society is evident. She not only wants the government to repeal Section 377 of IPC but also introduce transgenders' life stories in school syllabuses and the film censor boards to “...firmly root out scenes depicting transgender in a vulgar manner” (Vidya, 2013, p.138). It has taken long 66 years after Indian independence for the legal set up of our country to grant equal rights to a transgender to live the life of their choice with dignity and respect. One is now free to call oneself a ‘transsexual’ rather than a ‘transgender’.

Today the choice of the term ‘alternative sexuality’ allows one to promote the interplay of various complex physiological, psychological and social influences that form the determining factor of one's sexual orientation. In several cases hijras negate the very idea of gender binary. They choose to assert themselves as ‘neither man nor woman’.⁸ Now it is universally acknowledged there are a number of factors like the chromosomes, the gonads, the hormones along with social and rearing environment that affect one's choice of gender identity. And thus to break free from the notions of nature/ nurture; sex/gender divide- as discussed and criticized in celebrated feminist writings of Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*,⁹ Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*¹⁰ to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*- it is important to reinforce the choice of an individual in determining one's own destiny.

From this point of view I would now like to discuss the instance of David Reimer's biographical account *As Nature made Him: The Boy who was Raised as a Girl*.¹¹ Bruce and Brian were identical male children born to Ron and Janet Reimer on 22 Aug. 1965. Little eight months old Bruce's life changed on the operation table when the doctor accidentally burnt his penis while performing circumcision as a treatment for Phimosis. The Canadian couple sought both legal and medical help but without any fruitful result. Dr. John Money of John Hopkins

hospital, Baltimore, provided the ray of hope. Bruce was immediately taken up as a special case for sex reassignment. According to him the "...surgeons could remove the testicles and construct the feminine external genitals...could later be given the female hormones"(Colapinto, 2000,p.69) before the point a child gets locked into an identity as male or female.

No wonder that the fate of little Bruce was sealed by Dr. Money once he decided to apply his nurture as opposed to nature theory on him. The child became the famous experimental model for all his future experiments. He advised the parents not only to change the name but also help the child enact the conventional feminine gestures to internalize given set of gender roles. In some ways his methods were upheld as an exemplary case by the feminists of the time. However, Brenda did little to comply with this man's wish. Her constant struggle to break free from this burdened role playing are recorded in the words of her teachers, doctors and psychiatrists whom she had to meet at regular intervals. As soon as Brenda learnt about her past, her "...decision to revert to the sex of her biological makeup was immediate"(Colapinto, 2000, p.181). Brenda now took up the name David, after the Biblical hero who killed giant Goliath. In a similar way to revert back to the male body David had to undergo several sessions of psychotherapy, sex reassignment surgery, hormonal injections and that required fighting Dr. Money's role of the omnipotent God in his life. The medical treatises and journals of the time heavily criticized Dr. Money's experiments and his celebrated John/Joan (Brian/Bruce) case study.

Interestingly this case along with some other reported cases paved the path for the meeting of a distinguished group of human rights experts to draft, develop, discuss and reform the principles of Human Rights in a meeting held at GadjahMadaUniversity in Yogyakarta, Indonesia from 6 to 9 November, 2006. This convention unanimously adopted the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. Under the heading 18-"Protection Against Medical Abuse- indiscriminate medical experiments especially on minors" Yogyakarta Principles suggests that (B) the state shall- take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure that no child's body is irreversibly altered by medical procedures in an attempt to impose a gender identity without the full, free and informed consent of the child in accordance with the age and maturity of the child and guided by the principle that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. And 18 (C) asks the state to establish child protection mechanisms whereby no child is at risk of, or subjected to, medical abuse.

The urge to prove that one is different from what the society deemed to be, had led to unwarranted harassments and tortures on many lives. Today however our society has started to recognize LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) movements. It now allows a bulk of sexual minorities to choose what is right for them. Sex Reassignment Surgery along with series of psychological support is available in form of counseling and moral support. UNAIDS support to provide medical help to HIV patients as LGBT group comes under high risk factor form the part of positive state intervention.¹²

To wrap up my argument I would like to go back to the primary concern of my reading of the above mentioned three cases. To what extent can the 'body' of an individual carry marks of gender? Are the processes of becoming or constructing one's own identity predetermined? Why would some human choices considered to be part of some exclusionary practices? The answers to my questions lie in the fact that barriers that tend to limit basic rights of an individual- right to enjoy equality and nondiscrimination before law on basis of sexual orientation and gender identity- have broken down. What were considered to be exclusionary practice now has paved the path for the celebration of human choice and will. It has become possible to say the 'we are proud to be what we are'.¹⁰ Revathi, Vidya David Reimer's voices that were full of agony and despair may be have now changed to that of pride, joy and confidence.

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