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A Biannual Refereed International
Journal of English Letters

Vol. 18 No. 1 March 2019

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it deserves it.

- Mark Twain

Impact Factor: 8.380
COSMOS FOUNDATION
BERLIN BRANDENBURG,
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(AB)NORMAL LIVES
RED LIPSTICK: THE MEN IN MY LIFE
 AS A TRANSGENDER NARRATIVE

Anjali Singh

Their voices were harsh, their songs melancholy;
 They sang of lovers dying and or children left
 unborn...
 Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry
 breasts
 And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy.
 - Kamala Das, "The Dance of the Eunuchs"

Co-authored with Pooja Pande, a freelance writer-editor, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's biographical narrative, *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*, takes over from where her earlier book, *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* left off. Remarking on the angst faced by the LGBT community and broaching the elemental question of deciphering one's identity, and from it the very basic question of being and belonging, Laxmi freely and frankly disabuses the general consensus centred on transgender people. She calls attention towards the status of transgenders in India and attempts to address their basic needs and struggle. The voice of the voiceless is made explicit through this text.

While the book is structured around the men in her life, it is essentially about her, and traverses the varied paths she has taken to get to where she is today – a renowned transgender-rights activist. In all her dealings with the men she has come across in her life, be they men in her family, her friends, her colleagues or her lovers, she speaks honestly and sometimes brutally and frankly from the heart. Laxmi proclaims proudly, "I just can't be a victim. I am a celebration, I feel, and that's the narrative I choose for my story" (180). In this fascinating narrative, she tells the stories of the men she encounters, playing different roles in her life as creators, preservers and destroyers.

Biologically born a male in a distinguished Tripathi family from Gorakhpur and christened 'Raju' by her Brahmin parents, Laxmi is caught up in the roles that define gender and identity and finds herself attracted to boys. Mentally confused and taunted as being *girlish*, Laxmi is treated as an outcaste in her school. She is both, a man and a woman, or perhaps neither a man nor a woman, since both binaries seem to exist within her. Laxmi narrates,

What we're assigned as at birth – male or female – is our gender. And somewhere along the way, we human beings decided that gender could dictate our lives, steer us down certain paths, brand our behaviour, and inform almost all our choices – from something as trivial as the colour of your car to bigger decisions such as choosing a partner for life.... To me the term 'transgender' has always implied 'transcending gender' (250).

Joon Granucci Lesser in the article, "When Your Son Becomes Your Daughter: A Mother's Adjustment to a Transgender Child," talks about how "Trans people who express their gender identity from an early age are often rejected by their families. As students they experience resentment, prejudice, and threatening environments in schools, which leads to significant drop-out rates" (186). Laxmi talks about how she was vilified as a child on account of her being 'different'. In a shocking tale, she narrates how she was sexually abused as a young six-year-old child in her hometown of Gorakhpur:

He was my first cousin, twenty-one years old.... I fainted the first time. The pain was so intense I felt something had been ripped apart inside me, something was broken that could never be fixed. He even brought in another cousin and some friends. I was in constant pain (220).

She further questions whether a six-year old can even understand the meaning of abuse or even comprehend the violence done to him? "What does it mean to be sexually abused at such a young age when you don't even know what abuse means?" (220).

Struggling with existential questions on who he is, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi awakens to his true self, that of being a Hijra. She explains the origins of the word. "The word *Hijra* is derived from '*Hijir*,' which means a journey to find one's true self – and I went through this whole process of self-discovery to self-recognition and fighting for my gender identity." Laxmi prefers the word 'Hijra' over 'Trans' saying, "The word 'trans' is inadequate in every sense and especially in the Indian context. Here, the Kinnars and Hijras have been part of our history and ancient text like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and others" (25). She claims that it is within the Hijra community that she found the greatest self-alignment and self-identification. There is a force with which the gender-binary is maintained, and Pande calls this "collateral damage from the colonial era." Laxmi corroborates,

The Kinnar and Hijra community were very much respected in ancient India. We were very mainstream, nobody questioned our sexuality and we had much more respect and dignity. With the advent of the British era and western culture, sex became taboo and we too became taboo. We were criminalised under various acts like the Tribal Law Act, or Section 377, curbing us and our prosperity (27).

It is crucial to examine the status of transgender people in ancient India before dealing with their contemporary status. Transgender communities across south Asia date back more than 4,000 years and they appear in ancient texts as bearers of luck and fertility. In the *Mahabharat*, Vishnu and Arjun appear in their avataars of Mohini and Brihannala, respectively. The transgenders, through history, were given a status that was considerably higher than others. They were gainfully and respectably employed and were hired to guard the queens' chambers and assist priests in temples. With the arrival of the British in India and their Anti-Sodomy Law of 1861, which criminalized all acts of unnatural intercourse, they managed to overturn the respected status of the Hijras into that of criminals.

It is pertinent to note here that in a landmark judgement in 2014, the Supreme Court of India observed that "The transgender community, generally known as 'Hijras' in this country, are a section of Indian citizens who are treated by the society as unnatural and generally as objects of ridicule and even fear on account of superstition." In its judgement, the Supreme Court passed the ruling that

In view of the constitutional guarantee, the transgender community is entitled to basic rights, i.e., Right to Personal Liberty and Dignity, Freedom of Expression, Right to Education and Empowerment, Right against Violence, Discrimination and Exploitation, and the Right to Work. Moreover, every person must have the right to decide his/her gender expression and identity, including transsexuals, transgenders, hijras and should have the right to freely express their gender identity and be considered as a third sex (Bhalla).

Thus, today, the transgender people in India are considered to be the 'Third Gender'. This ruling has ensured that all forms that specify stating the gender must incorporate a third column named 'Third Gender' apart from the columns of male and female. In spite of this legal recognition, even today, transgenders at large have been forced

to live on the fringes of contemporary Indian society: "The on ground struggle to shape reality continues – basic amenities, like toilets, only cater to males or females" (221). Some things have definitely altered. Railway tickets now have the option of third gender and more things are evolving slowly but surely.

The many hurdles the transgender people face due to lack of legal representation and social ostracism relegates them to the margins. The Social Construction Theory perceives them as abnormal because they remain outside the socially agreed upon norm of normal. They have been treated as 'abject' – someone who is rejected by social reason, the communal consensus that underpins a social order. The abject exists somewhere between the concept of an object and the concept of the subject and can be examined on the lines of the abjection theory developed by Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. She explains that "The abject has to do with what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). The term abjection literally means "the state of being cast off," something that inherently disturbs conventional identity and cultural concepts. As a concept it is often used to describe bodies and things that one finds repulsive or disgusting, and in order to preserve one's identity they are cast out, especially gendered and sexed bodies – especially those occupied by transgender individuals.

Laxmi is justified when she observes that "It says something about us as a culture when we build blocks of our own identities and selves through the sheer politics of othering" (221). She argues, "the notion of heterosexual is, in itself, questionable. It is the man who is XY and hence has the woman in him. This 'manliness' then, is just a show, nothing but a convenient construct, a pretence to keep patriarchy alive, to keep women tamed" (230). As a hijra, Laxmi can access both states of being. Transphobia, as defined by Anne Bolin in her book *Transcending and Transgendering: Male-to-Female Transsexuals, Dichotomy and Diversity*, "is the fear and hatred of transgender persons, where the male-to-female transgender incites transphobia through her implicit challenge to the binary division of gender upon which male cultural and political hegemony depends. The transphobia that surrounds their lives fuels violence against them" (80). In response to the transphobia and resultant abuse she grew up with, Laxmi has had her revenge. In clear terms she states, "Their patriarchy crushed my femininity and now I was coming back to crush them.... I made patriarchy come crawling to me, on its knees to

be on my satin bedsheet" (212). She suggests that women have to renegotiate their territories among male-dominated groups.

Transgender people experience discrimination owing to their gender identity and expression and their sexual orientation. According to the last census, there are about two million transgenders in India but because they are not legally recognized, they are ostracized, discriminated against, abused and often forced into prostitution. The transgender community has long endured police violence in India. However, police violence cannot be seen in isolation as it mirrors the widespread social bias and prejudice against transgenders who have long been denied basic rights, including the right to vote, own property, marry or claim a formal identity through a passport or other government identification. They have also been unable to secure government services, such as food subsidies, education, employment and health care. The few laws that do exist are also not enforced. With most of the hijras being uneducated they are neither able to understand nor raise their voice against the rampant injustice and anarchy pervading the system. Often victims of violence and abuse, Serena Nanda in her book *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* states that transgender people are, "four times more likely to live in poverty and face unemployment twice as much as the general population. It is also a sad reality that about 90 per cent of the transgenders are discriminated against in work places. They face significant amounts of psychological and emotional stress and are soft targets of hate crimes" (20). Transgender people experience these realities every day of their lives with questions that Laxmi asks, "Will everyone disown me? Will I have to become a sex worker? Is my fate sealed? Should I kill myself?" (210).

She has personally experienced this discrimination back in 2010 when she was made to leave a dinner at the Bombay Gymkhana: "I had taken it up with the Maharashtra Human Rights Court and the Management were summoned. The case is still in the court and waiting for judgement" (172). All establishments exercise their "right to reserve admission." Pande explains the reasons behind this. "The prejudices in our society against any kind of expression – in terms of sexuality or self-identity – that does not conform to that one imagination of heterosexuality, stem back to the time of the Raj when the British were laying down the laws of the land in ways that were acceptable to them" (2).

The politics around queer activism sickened Laxmi and she established *Astitva*, a non-profit organization working with sexual minorities caught in the fight for existence. She mentions the reason behind keeping this name. "Astitva means existence, identity, and this organization was about our fight for our existence" (188). The Supreme Court's two-judge bench has said in its ruling that "Recognition of transgenders as a third gender is not a social or medical issue but a human rights issue. Transgenders are also citizens of India. The spirit of the constitution is to provide equal opportunity to every citizen to grow and attain their potential, irrespective of caste, religion or gender."

Laxmi became the first transgender person to represent the Asia-Pacific region at the UN in 2008. She has inspired a lot of Hijras in India to participate in mainstream activities, giving up their traditional roles as dancers, prostitutes and beggars. Hers is a fight against the objectification of the body in a society driven by what fits into the socially-constructed theory of binaries. To this end, she has 'created' the persona of Laxmi and has embraced the identity of a transgender very deliberately.

While the 2014 Supreme Court judgment was a historic one, finally recognizing the rights of transgender people and treating them equal to other Indians, earlier in 2013, the Supreme Court had ruled that it is up to the Indian Parliament to repeal Section 377, which criminalizes same-sex relations among consenting adults, and is used as a justification for discrimination against transgenders and homosexuals. This was a real setback for the rights of LGBT communities, because it overturned the landmark judgment of the Delhi High Court which had ruled that section 377 violates fundamental freedoms. These laws have proven to be difficult hurdles on the road to equality for the marginalized LGBT community in India.

In a strange twist, while transgender people in India, and especially hijras, now have the right to official recognition as members of a third gender, they do not have the right to have "unnatural sex." They often live in criminalized contexts making them soft targets for extortion, abuse, and violence. Caught up in definitions and identities, as well as social constructs, Laxmi suggests that sexuality is fluid and defines it as separate from sex. Serena Nanda also defines gender identity as "a person's core sense of being male, female, or a gender that is in-between or both" (22). In an extended Monologue, Laxmi talks about her biological other and says,

Raju lives and breathes inside me and no matter what I think or do or say, or how much I fight as an activist for transgenders' rights. Despite the breast implants that make me feel like a woman and my saris and my precious lipsticks, Raju will always live and breathe inside me. He refuses to leave, this oldest son of the Tripathi clan on whose shoulders rest innumerable family responsibilities. I could be applying my favourite mascara and getting ready to go out, and suddenly there he is—staring back at me in the mirror as I pause, brush in hand, and look back at him (211).

Her sisters still call her *Raju Bhaiya*. Becoming Laxmi does not mean that Raju has to die. These are blurred identities and are part and parcel of the life of a transgender.

Over the years, the politics of gender and social construct has been debated by scholars all over the world. In contemporary times, the dialogue has shifted to assessing the role that gender has played in establishing gender identity, which is different from the assigned sex (biological sex). There is a greater need to talk about a wide range of gender expressions and identities which goes beyond the traditional notions of gender. In the face of an oppressive silencing of the binary gender paradigm, transgenders find it extremely difficult to give voice to their existence and speak of their experiences in a language which is not neutral. As Laxmi says, "All angst is linguistic. There is no word in Indian languages for 'homosexual.' The concept did not exist before British India" (189). So Laxmi calls herself a 'hijra' and concocts a new etymology (pure soul). She asks, "Am I a woman? I am not. But I'm not a man..." (236). The question of her identity, that dialogue with herself remains unaddressed and unanswered.

When she became a hijra, her family did not understand why she was doing that. Neither could they understand what she was going through:

As it is, I never told them directly—they found out one fine evening when they turned on the news and saw me speaking on behalf of hijras, as a hijra myself.... They could so easily have shunned me, which is the fate of most eunuchs in our country. But instead they chose the more difficult option: They wanted me to continue to live with them, as I was. I could be whoever I was, whoever I wanted to be—even if it meant being a hijra, if that's what made me most comfortable in my skin—but to them, I must stay and always remain Raju (113).

Laxmi aims to be part of the ongoing narrative around gender and sexuality in terms of real time developments, such as the Transgender Bill and the status of Sec 377. K. Subapriya, in her article "Unveiling the Crisis of Transgender in India: A Study of Living Smile Vidya's Autobiography" suggests in relation to Laxmi that, "Her narrative is not a mere record of experience of a single transgender but a mirror showing the plight and horrible state of transgenders in India. She lays emphasis on the need of emancipation of those unheard and unseen voices of transgenders and her life becomes a testimony and voices out for a cause" (62). However, the majority of transgenders still face victimization owing to transphobia as is evident in *The Times of India* report by Ashis Poddar on the first transgender principal of a college in India, Manabi Bandopadhyay, "who had set an example to transgenders that education could pay off, has been forced to quit as principal of Krishnagore Women's College" (7). Fed up with the gheraos against her by the college teachers, she submitted her resignation on 23 December, 2016 after a year and half as the principal.

Recently, in April 2015, a historic private bill was passed in the Rajya Sabha for the welfare of the transgender people. The Bill promises welfare board and reservation quotas in education and in jobs. On 29 June 2016, the Supreme Court referred a petition against Section 377 filed for the first time by five LGBT 'celebrities' – Ritu Dalmia, Aman Nath, Navtej Singh Johar, Sunil Mehra and Ayesha Kapur – to a constitution bench. It is a ray of hope and can be taken as a precursor to better times to come.

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