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### Interrogating the Plurality of Trans' genders: A Close Reading of Male to Female Transsexual Autobiographies

#### ***Abstract***

In the present paper an attempt has been made to explore the multiple genders with the close reading of two auto/biographies, *A Truth about Me: A Story of My Life* by A. Revati (2010) and *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* by Laxminarayan Thripati (2015). A gender theorist, Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* states "Gender is not exactly what one "is" nor it is precisely what one "has." Gender is apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes." (54). This statement can be taken for the support to state that gender is fluid which has not been restricted to binaries and one must dare to express it if he/she does not feel to fit into the gender roles confirmed by the patriarchal society. That's how a transsexual, Laxmi lives embracing her identity as a 'hijra' than fitting into the box of gender binaries. She says, "A hijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, but not a man either. A hijra's male body is a trap- not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that assumes a hijra to be a man" (40). But another autobiography by a transsexual, A. Revati acts as a counter narrative for it. Revati's story reveals the fact that her essence of life lies in 'becoming a woman'. She says, "To become a woman, to turn feminine, all I needed to do was get rid of this male object and I would become

free to be a woman, like other women” (66). Shifting changes in the lives of transgender and transsexual, their new approaches to look at their mind, body and identity reveal the fact that the socio- cultural elements play predominant role in constructing their selves. Thus the paper examines and interrogates the experiences and life situations of these transsexuals in light of the issues such as different gender expressions, and multiple gender identities within the transgender categories. The paper also focuses on the issues of ‘becoming a woman’, fe/maleness, authorship and the construction of trans bodies and identities with different/new perspectives. The paper is grounded on transgender and transsexual theories for the approach.

Key words- Gender, Transgender, Queer, Body, Self, Mind and Patriarchy

The term ‘self’ looks problematic when it is discussed in the context of transsexual lives. Revati, a transsexual also uses the term ‘real self’ in her autobiography *A Truth about Me: A Story of My Life*. After undergoing *Sex Reassignment Surgery*<sup>1</sup> she feels happy saying that she became a woman and reached her real self finally. But, what does she mean when she uses the term ‘to become a woman’? Does this ‘real/true self’ exist in the case of transsexuals? Do they achieve or embrace their ‘true self’ and ‘identity’ at the end? What are the factors that make them to embrace or not to embrace a particular identity? And how do they differ in claiming their identities are some of the questions the paper tries to address.

When these transsexuals speak about their ‘real/true self’ or about the process of ‘becoming a woman’, it is important to question whether they are concerned more about their feminine feelings, undergoing surgery or about the identity they desire to construct?

As Adrienne Rich states “A movement for change lives in feelings, actions and words” (223), it is the feminine feelings and actions that bring changes in the lives of two male to female transsexuals, Revati and Laxmi. Their dominant desires of femininity led them to meet their psychological, emotional, physical and sexual needs to achieve and embrace the ‘true self’ and ‘identity’ of their choice. At first both of them realize that their feelings are different than their assigned gender roles. Then with the help of surgery they try to fit into their bodies to construct

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<sup>1</sup> It is also called as SRS and by many other terms. It is lengthy medical process of changing the sex of a male or female transgender who desires to alter their bodies and identities.

the identities they desired. But the context is different in the case of another male to female transsexual, Mona. She neither likes her womanhood nor her *eunuch*<sup>2</sup>hood but instead keeps on complaining about her state of being neither a man nor a woman and nor a eunuch. Hence the present paper examines how the three male to female autobiographies, *Myself Mona Ahmad* (2001) by Mona Ahmad, *A Truth about Me: A Story of My Life* (2010) by A. Revati and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) by Laxminarayan Thripati act as the counter narratives to each other dealing with various gender expressions and identities. The paper seminally concentrates to explore the plural genders as expressed in the select texts and sheds light on the issues like, ‘becoming a woman or a *hijra*<sup>3</sup>, ‘self’ and ‘aligning the mind and the body’. Transgender realize that their genuine feelings mismatch to the assigned genders and bodies and construct their identities the way they desire to be. Hence the paper also focuses to understand the ways through which they construct themselves, their bodies and identities. Shifting changes in the gender identities, the act of being neither a man nor a woman and an act of being both a man (masculine) and a woman (feminine) bring into them the sense of being different and queer. But the concept of transgender draws itself back from the queer perspective and moves in several approaches.

The term transgender refers to the person who does not confirm to his/her gender roles assigned at birth. It consists wide range of gender identities, such as transgender woman/ male to female transgender, transgender man/ female to male transgender, transsexuals, female to male transsexual/ transsexual man/ trans man, male to female transsexual/ transsexual woman/ trans woman, *Jogappa*<sup>4</sup>, or *Koti*<sup>5</sup>, etc. The traditional notion about male to female transsexuals is that all of them are self-identified women. Like the other transsexual autobiographies above mentioned texts begin with the narration of childhood experiences of Mona, Revati and Laxmi.

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<sup>2</sup> It is an outdated term used to call transgender in the kings’ dinesties.

<sup>3</sup> A popular cultural term used in India to address the third genders or transgender. It is used in few in South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangaldesh.

<sup>4</sup> The term Jogti refers to a biological female who dedicates herself to serve the Goddess Yellamma (North Karnataka, India) as the tradition of her family. She is also called as Devadasi. But it also refers to a male who dedicates himself in the service of same goddess as a part of his family tradition. The difference between both of them is a male servant who lives like a woman identifies himself with the transgender and their community. But he is not an integral part of the tradition of hijra community. Jogappa and Jogya are other names for male to female transgender Jogti.

<sup>5</sup>The term is commonly used in India, refers to an effeminate man who prefers feminine gender roles in same sex relationships. Some of them are bi-sexual too. They do not undergo any surgeries to construct their identities.

Vivid and bitter descriptions of their childhood demonstrate typical life patterns of the girls and boys. What makes them confused and complicated is not what they are (male) and how they feel (feminine) but the institutionalized and gender constructed notions of society, culture, norms, mannerisms and behavior set by the patriarchal society. Revati and Laxmi were humiliated the moment they failed to meet the expected gender roles. They were being asked, "Aren't you a boy? Why do you walk like a girl? Why do you wear girls' cloths?" (4). Revati who is born as a boy, Doreswamy has been attacked by such questions. But Revati, as a boy- Doreswamy managed to be in closet by creating her own private space in the public in her childhood. People's constant gaze would make the boy Doreswamy to be aware of his girlish behavior and that makes him to realize that he is different from others. So he responds, "It felt natural for me to do so. I did not know how to be like a boy. It was like eating for me- just as I would not stop eating because someone asked me not to eat, I felt I could not stop being a girl, because they told me I ought not to be so!" (7). Mona and Laxmi's cases are not different than their experiences. These kinds of feminine feelings of childhood remain the same till the end of their lives unlike their body. But the attention is needed in ways they express contradictory views in embracing their desired gender identities which depends upon the intensity of their feelings. The evidence supporting this fact lies in the findings of Harry Benjamin who rightly categorized the transsexual persons on the basis of three levels of intensity: 'Transsexual (nonsurgical)', 'Transsexual (moderate intensity)' and 'Transsexual (high intensity).' (23). There are many transsexuals who have such kinds of varied levels of intensity.

The first level of intensity refers to a nonsurgical transsexual. Does Benjamin mean that it refers to those who do not undergo the surgery? But Transsexual person is the one who seeks gender and sex transition through hormonal or sex reassignment therapy. Does he mean that they undergo only hormonal therapies (breast implant therapy, in case of female transsexuals)? He suggests that the second level of transsexuals who have moderate intensity may benefit from estrogen medication as a "substitute for or preliminary to operation." (23). Laxmi, for instance, is such type of transsexual who rejects to undergo SRS but choose to go for breast implant therapy. Undergoing surgery is a choice for some of them. Some transsexuals think that castration or sex reassignment surgery will make them complete transsexuals. So here, third level refers to the transsexual who has high intensity of undergoing the sex reassignment surgery seeking

transition. It is appropriate to mention Revati in this context who says that she became a real woman only after her castration.

But, Benjamin's view looks contradictory in defining a 'true transsexual'. Speaking about male to female transsexuals he states, "True transsexuals feel that they belong to the other sex, they want to be and function as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such. For them, their sex organs, the primary (testes) as well as the secondary (penis and others) are disgusting deformities that must be changed by the surgeon's knife." (13). This definition suits to the exact feelings of Revati who intensely feel to undergo surgery believing that it can only make her a true transsexual. She lives like a typical woman throughout her life after undergoing castration. She states "I WAS ECSTATIC-I was at last a woman." (74). But some male to female transsexuals like Mona and others who have undergone castration do not meet the above definition of transsexual. The other transsexuals like Laxmi do not desire SRS but meet some elements of Benjamin's definition of a 'true transsexual'. Whatever, Benjamin's work which focuses on male to female transsexuals remains beyond the concept of female to male transsexuals for whom SRS is not a practical matter. Because how can he define 'true transsexualism' in the case of female to male transsexual is a seminal question which can be raised in this context.

To support the fact that gender is fluid, another gender theorist, Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* states "Gender is not exactly what one "is" nor it is precisely what one "has." Gender is apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes." (54). This statement can be taken for the growing support to say that one need not try to fit into the gender roles which are assigned by the patriarchal society if he or she does not feel so. And they cannot be resisted for their intense gender expressions. A transsexual, Laxmi is one such transsexual who dares to live her life embracing her identity just as a 'hijra' than fitting into the boxes of gender binaries. She says, "A hijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, but not a man either. A hijra's male body is a trap- not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that assumes a hijra to be a man." (40). But an autobiography of A. Revati acts as a counter narrative in this context. Her story of life reveals the fact that the essence of life lies in 'becoming a woman'. She

says, "To become a woman, to turn feminine, all I needed to do was get rid of this male object and I would become free to be a woman, like other women." (66).

Thus these two male to female transsexuals reveal that gender is not consistent even in the category of transsexuals and transgender culture. From the beginning till the end Revati tries to become a woman, becomes woman and lives like a woman. Her parents and brothers punish her badly for expressing non confirmed gender roles. Though she is thrown out of her family she embraces her new gender identity by becoming a woman. After going through the castration she says, "I felt that finally the female in me would be freed from my male body." (67).

Contradictory to her case, Colette Chiland, in his book *Transsexualism: Illusion and Reality* refers a French psychiatrist and professor of Forensic Medicine, Jacques Breton's definition of transsexualism,

"Two contradictory ones are advanced:

The classical definition: a male transsexual is a man with the mind of a woman

The modernistic definition: a male transsexual is a woman with the body of a man." (2003: 16). These definitions reveal shifting changes in the lives of transsexuals and their new approaches to look at their new` body and identity.

Revati and most of the other transsexuals feel intensely to undergo the castration or/and. Whatever, the definition of Colette Chiland (the modernistic definition: a male transsexual is a woman with the body of a man') proves that the transition of body limits the possibilities of plural gender expressions. And they even develop the confused and unfulfilled sense of self in the process of bodily changes, mimicking the gender confirmed roles and fitting into the gender binaries.

Speaking about the multiple genders Julie Nagoshi and others state "Sexual orientation is not the same as gender identity and it becomes just as problematic for homosexuals and heterosexuals if genders are, in fact, multiple, or not necessarily male nor female." (75). Her statement makes us to understand that even Mona has gone through this conflict. She never had any interest in sex. She says, "I do not think it is because I am a eunuch. From within I always had no desire for sex." (123). But this is not true in case of Revati and Laxmi. Though both of them have

differences in perspectives and approaches in confirming their gender identities, as their autobiographies show, they have not gone through any of the conflicts and contradictions in regard to their sexual orientation.

Throughout her life Mona says, “My heart is like woman’s heart. So I cannot understand. Had I been a man with man’s heart and mind, I would have no problem. Being neither male nor female nor eunuch, who am I?” (6). And she is been asked by her friend Dayanita, whether she would like to go to Singapore for a sex change operation. She replied, “You really don’t understand. I am the third sex, not the man trying to be a woman. It is your society’s problem that you only recognize two sexes.” (15). But the contradiction is that she undergoes the castration. She says, “After my castration, I broke my heart. But even without the castration, what was the hope for me? After castration I never wore Bangles, I never made jewelry. I never took gifts from visitors; many desires went with castration.” (110). This type of confused state of mind with fluid and unnamed multiple gender identities destabilize theories of/on transgender supporting the term “both/ neither” used by Katrina Roen (505).

The terminology “both/ neither” and “either/or” suggested by Katrina Roen supports the view of Broad who states “Gender categories were destabilized not only through assertions of not fitting either gender, but also through claims to actually being a bit of both. It is the notion of transgender meaning both man and woman that drives many in the community to hold up intersexuality as perhaps the best way to transgender existence. The idea is that by being transgender one really embodies an intersexual identity of being both man and woman.” (256-257). This statement aptly applies to Laxmi as well. Laxmi says, “Being a hijra made me glamorous and militant. At first, I seemed a stranger to myself. But over time, the timid, shy Laxminarayan of old, faded out of existence, and the Laxmi you see before you, aggressive, ready to fight the world, stood in his place. I don’t regret my decision. But then, it’s not as if I don’t miss my old self either. I covered my face with a mask till the mask became my skin. And yet there are times when I want to rip off that mask and feel the tenderness of my skin, as it naturally is.” (169).

The above stated views are supported by the statement of Bornstein “I identify as neither male nor female, and now that my lover is going through his gender change, it turn out I’m neither straight nor gay.” (4). She further states “What I have found as a result of this borderline life is that the more fluid my identity has become, and the less demanding my own need to belong to the camps of male, female, gay or straight, the more playful and less dictatorial my fashion has become- as well as my style of self-expression.” (4). Bornstein’s feelings are put forth appropriately with the supportive view of Mona who says “I feel I am neither man nor woman and nor a eunuch.” (160).

Thus, the life experiences of these transsexuals show that for every transsexual the three phases of life seem significant: The life before transition, in between period and the life after trans’formation. But where do they stand the most? They stuck in between or they remain as a bit of two? It is because the consciousness of fe/maleness is deep seated in the minds of all the transsexuals like Laxmi. She stays as the beloved son, Laxminarayan Thripati for her parents at home but a hijra for herself and for the outer world. This fact has been revealed in claiming their authorship. Mona and Laxmi capture the attention of the reader through their titles: unlike the main stream autobiographies these autobiographies carry the names of writers in the title. Since all the transsexuals have changed their gender identities from male to female they consider themselves as women. At first when they join their communities they change their male names into female names. And they claim their authenticity of writing by mentioning their female names. For instance, Revati claims her authorship by her female name. But Mona’s auto/biography shows both the female (Mona, the name she changed herself) and male (Ahmad, her boyhood name given by her parents) names in the title. She calls herself Mona Ahmad, the name which clearly shows her confused state of mind, complexity of being and ambiguous identity. For the transsexuals, changing their male name into female name gives them the identity of the women as it is one of the processes of ‘becoming woman’. But in case of Mona Ahmad, it seems she is torn between her mind and body. She neither likes her body (male) and nor even her feminine feelings and she does not want to be like a woman. It is difficult to guess explain the reasons behind using both her male and female names in the narrative. The other transsexual Laxmi also uses her male name to claim her authorship. It shows the deliberate act of establishing the hijra identity and locating herself within the context of transgender community.

Though she is much clearer of the issues, her feelings, emotions and her needs, in the title of her auto/biography (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*) much emphasis has been given on her hijra hood and hijra identity than her female name.

To conclude, Susan Stryker argues that in Trans theory there is an inherent recognition that the trans position is problematic. The labels “man” and “woman” are inadequate to describe the trans experience, as the trans person’s history and knowledge of the world is so different from that of “men born men” or “women born women. Yet the responsibility to recognize and articulate that position is no one else’s but the self’s.” (XIV). This argument takes the support an idea of Katrina Roen who states that both “both/ neither” and “either/or” (505) are politically conceptualized positions which stand against to each other, one completely rejecting the gender binaries and the latter trying to fit into it.

Both the arguments are quite supportive to the title of the paper which depict how the shifting changes happen in the gender identities and paves the ways to have the possibilities of having fluid and plural genders with which other transsexuals identify themselves. Though they all identify themselves as the women and hijras, their identities seem beyond the frames of patriarchy and transgenderism. Someone who has experienced marginalization as the result of a physical, psychological, emotional, gender and sexual differences like these transsexuals may sense that he or she is not alone in the suffering because of the choices they made in regard to their gender identities and sexual orientation. So these autobiographies do not stay only as an act of writing one’s own lived experiences but also as an act of embodying community and culture. Their lives also reveal an account of a set of cultural beliefs of the society and their community in which they live. If the stories of Revati and Mona reveal the ways in which the narratives are used to construct the culture of the past, the story of Laxmi reveals how one can build their present with the past experiences they have gone through.

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