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REVERBERATION OF SELF: A. REVATHI'S THE TRUTH ABOUT ME: A HIJRA LIFE STORY

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Queer studies, which began to gain theoretical relevance in the beginning of the last decade, had also contributed to a common epistemological interface with 'Transgender Studies'. Transgender is a person whose self-identified gender does not correspond to the gender assigned to them at birth. Their gender identity may not confirm to conventional binary notions of male and female, but rather as a third gender. There is a crucial distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. Sex refers to the biological anatomy of a person typically categorized as 'male', 'female' or 'intersex'. Gender however refers to the cultural and social constructs which characterizes the sexes. These include taught behaviors, roles, norms, relationships and interaction with the opposite sex. Thus transgender person's gender identity and biological sex can be said to be incongruent.

India is unique in its social acceptance of 'hijra' life style. As a community, Indian society treats hijras the so called transgenders with a combination of fascination, revulsion and fear. As a means of survival hijras primarily engage in begging and prostitution. For a small fee they also perform 'badaai' – local families sometimes welcome them into their homes to bless auspicious births or weddings. For the most part, however, sex work is the most profitable option for them. As a result, Indian hijras struggle as a traditionally marginalized social class, subject to gender violence and various other human rights violations. Confined to live on the outskirts of regulated society, the plight of the hijra remains largely invisible. Domestic human rights protections for hijras affected by gender violence are virtually non-existent and antiquated statutory provisions criminalize the hijra way of life in India. Moreover, international human rights treaties fail to adequately address the subject of 'gender' relying instead on the elimination on the basis of 'sex', a classic binary Western construct.

A.Revathi is a fairly well-known transgender activist in Bangalore. She works with Sangama, a Bangalore-based NGO for sexual minorities facing oppression. Her first book, *Unarvum Uruvum* (loosely translated as "Feelings and the Whole Body") documented her field studies with hijras in the state of Tamil Nadu. *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, is her second book, and her autobiography. It is translated from the original Tamil by V. Geetha.

The Truth About Me isn't meant to someone looking for an easy read, nor is it perhaps the best book to pick up for a detailed explanation of the hijra way of life in the Houses, the hierarchies and the rituals. A. Revathi documents them as they affect her life, but her aim in her autobiography is to speak for herself, her life, sorrows and joys, not for the entire hijra community. The paper emphasizes on the sex segregation and identity construction of the transgenders in the Indian society. She says "*The Truth About Me* is about my everyday experience of discrimination, ridicule and pain; it is also about my endurance and my joys" (TAM, preface).

The story opens in small village in Tamil Nadu. Doraisamy was the youngest of five children. He grew up shy with an inclination to dress as a girl and do traditional woman activities around the house – the domestic chores, the games, the singing and dancing. As an indulged youngest child, this behaviour must at first have seemed merely precious. It was harder to ignore as he grew older; Doraisamy spends his childhood

years with a growing unease as he tries to negotiate his body's incongruity with his inner desires and natural talents.

I think I was in class 7 when I took part in the annual day celebrations. There was to be dancing, singing and also a play. I played Chandramathi in *Harishchandra...* I think I did this exceptionally well, because everyone praised me saying that I looked and acted like a real woman this pleased me very much.(TAM, 9)

He was punished physically by his family members for his behaviours. In his mid-teens he met a group of like-spirited men, who introduced him to visiting hijras. Doraisamy stole some money and an earring from his mother, and ran away from home. He went to Delhi, where his chosen *guru* (teacher, here treated as mentor/mother) lived, and asked her to take him under her wing. And there Doraisamy changes as Revathi.

As Revathi, she could dress, walk, and talk as a woman. But she is, of course, a hijra, that liminal third-sex, and so she was constrained to live and earn in specific places, in specific manners. The story follows Revathi's life as she moved from city to city, from Hijra House to House. Revathi yearned to live freely, to love, to be a woman. The hijra elders forbade her from taking a husband, or a steady man. Proscribed from marriage, unable to work, unrecognised by the state bureaucracy, Revathi had only three options to make money – she could beg, she could bless, or she could do sex work. Initially, she begged, in the flamboyant, utterly recognisable hijra style; but she felt restricted and constrained by the rules and demands of her hijra house, with her *guru* and her sisters. One of the underlying themes of Revathi's life is that for each step she took to attaining her desires – the *nirvaanam* or castration, the financial power, the recognition, support and intimacy of other hijras who knew what she was going through, and applauded her zeal and valued her as a person she recognised new avenues of desire, of freedom, she now incoherently yearned for.

A large part of the novel is taken up with her steps into sex work – it's hard to understand, to remember how limited her choices within the hijra houses were, but in essence, at the age of twenty Revathi decided to take up sex work in order to fulfill her sexual desires. This was the only way, at the time that she could come close to sexual satisfaction. But being a sex worker and sexual minority, means that you get the wrong kind of attention. Revathi does mention that she had moments of happiness in her life, but details in dry terms the brutal facts of life as a hijra – the dangers, the assaults, and the rapes. Her tone while she describes the violence committed on her body – by clients, by random rowdies, by policemen – is one of matter-of-fact reportage. Revathi wants us to feel her pains and her sorrows, but her sufferings are not sensationalized and the dramatic moments reveals the physical and emotional traumas.

Aside from the problems she has outside the hijra houses and within (oppressive gurus, infighting with other hijras, battles with other houses) Revathi maintains a fragile relationship with her family, whose acceptance of her new state is grudging at best. Aside from the tensions surrounding her gender identity, her family is involved in long-standing conflict over the parental property.

When Revathi finally moved to Bangalore, she found 'daughters' of her own, three young people from educated, fairly well-to-do families. The difference between these three hijras and the others of Revathi's acquaintance are startling – they were not comfortable within the hijra houses, requiring more freedom and space, they did not dress conservatively outside of sex work. Revathi sympathised with their desires, and gave them the freedom they wanted and needed. One of these daughters was Famila – another recognizable name. Famila was a dynamic hijra-feminist-queer activist. Though nominally under Revathi's care, it is Famila who drew her into the realm of social activism, by introducing her to Sangama. Revathi defied hijra custom by taking a paying job at Sangama, where she learned about her rights, about what could be done to educate other people about those rights. Sangama gave Revathi the language to express her dissatisfaction and her desires, her need for her hijra sisters as well as her discomfort within their confining homes. She gradually discovers her identity as a true and dignified human being. "I am not diseased. I consider myself a woman. But I possessed the form of a man. I wanted to rid myself of that form and live as a complete woman. How can that be wrong?"(TWA, 262)

Revathi's words give the clear impression that she is not willing to take up prostitution as her livelihood. One could follow her words to convince the other sexual minorities that life is not a curse. Her story will help them to get out of the stigma. Revathi words never failed to inspire the people of her community. Her narrative evolves through the book from the simple to the more sophisticated. While the prose never attempts

artistic stylisation, it is direct, heartfelt, and very honest. Within those boundaries of 'plain prose' one sees the evolution of Revathi whose thoughts and feelings grow clearer and attain more gravity.

For all that Revathi defines her passions and duties in terms of service to those she cared for, she maintains a fierce, passionate espousal of her rights as a human being: to be treated with dignity, respect and acceptance. There's a note of ruthless practicality throughout her memoir that testifies to the affirmation of life, of being alive and whole, that she must make everyday to be the person she wants to be. It is her claim that society should consider her not as someone from the sexually minority community but an ordinary human being. She believes that one day she will fill the irreducible gap between the marginalized and the 'normal' being.

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