

Reclaiming Dignity: A Study on Transgender Experiences in *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*

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<p>Received on: 21 Dec 2024</p> <p>Revised on: 18 Jan 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 23 Jan 2025</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – Transgender, intersectionality, education, discrimination, struggles</p>	<p>Transgender people in India, often referred to as hijras, aravanis, or kothis, have a rich cultural history but face significant challenges in contemporary society. Despite their recognized presence in Indian culture and religion for centuries, they encounter widespread discrimination, marginalization, and violence. Most of the violences and prejudices transgender individuals are facing due to their gender identity and expression. These violations are compounded when intersecting with other social categories such as caste, class, ethnicity, and disability. They face substantial barriers in accessing education and employment. When it comes to educational settings, they experience bullying, harassment, and exclusion, leading to high dropout rates. The influences of these intersectional factors are evident in A. Revathi's <i>Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story</i>. Her autobiography depicts the life and struggles of the 'Third Sex' in Indian society. Revathi is an Indian transgender activist and a writer. She writes about the unspoken tales of the transgender lives and how they are socially stigmatized under the mainstream point of view. <i>Truth About Me</i> is one of the seminal works in literature which explores the complexities faced by transgender individuals in India. It discusses how the mainstream society mistreats and subjugates the transgender community within the constitution and law where all have the equal right to live regardless to sex, caste, gender, etc.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Social stigmatization refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes that society holds against people based on their sexual behaviours, gender identity, or gender expression. Transgender people often face physical and sexual violence due to their gender identity and expression. This violence can come from family members, community members, or strangers. Many transgender individuals, particularly those who are visibly gender nonconforming are targets of hate crimes and physical assaults. Sexual

violence is prevalent with many transgender individuals experiencing sexual harassment and assault, often as a means of 'corrective' behaviour by those who wish to enforce traditional gender norms. A. Revathi had faced violence from her family members as well as from the government authorities. She

recalls,

...My middle brother was at home though. As soon as I stepped in, he shut the door, grabbed a cricket bat, and began hitting me, all the

while screaming, 'That'll teach you to go with those Number 9s. Let's see you wear a sari again, or dance, you motherfucking pottai!' He beat me hard mindlessly, yelling that he wanted to kill me, I who had dared to run away... (55)

This lines vividly illustrates the severe physical and emotional violence face by transgender people within their own families upon revealing their true gender identity. When Revathi returns home, her middle brother's response is not one of the understanding or acceptance but rather of hostility and aggression. The act of grabbing a cricket bat and physically assaulting her underscores the fear, anger, and confusion that family members might experience when confronted with a transgender identity, which they may perceive as a deviation from societal norms. Revathi's existence is cursed by her upbringing in her household, driving her to leave home in pursuit of like-minded individuals. Her primary source of sad reality was her own home, which turned out to be fatal rather than the society around her. For a *hijra*, who are frequently mistreated due to their sexual orientation, family acceptance is crucial, since it appears to be the sole source of genuine support in their lives (Kumar, et al 2022). A similar encounter can be seen in Living Smile Vidya, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and other well-known transgender right activists' narratives.

1.1 Revathi's Life: An Intersectional Perspective

A. Revathi provides a comparable narrative of the gender-based abuse and persecution experienced by the community in her autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*.

"But boys at school, as well as men and women who saw me outside the house, would call out 'Hey, Number 9!', 'female thing', and 'female boy'. Some even teased me, saying, 'Aren't you a boy? Why do you walk like a girl? Why do you wear girl's clothes?' I understood that I was indeed like that. In fact, I wanted to be so" (Revathi 4). In Revathi's life, intersectionality helps to explore how her experiences are shaped by the overlapping and interdependent systems of oppression and discrimination she faces as a transgender individual. Revathi's experiences with discrimination and self-acceptance are fundamentally shaped by her gender identity and expression. Because she dresses and walks in ways that frequently

coincide with girls, she gets teased and harassed, which serves as a reminder of the rigid gender binary and societal standards that penalize nonconformity. Her acceptance of who she really is in spite of social pressure highlights the individual battle for acceptance and recognition of one's gender identity. The demeaning terms and mockery, such as "Number 9," "female thing," and "female boy," highlight Revathi's experience with transphobia and social stigma. By dehumanizing and marginalizing her, these labels highlight how cultural beliefs support prejudice against transgender people. Understanding how these societal attitudes interact with other aspects of identity to heighten the prejudice she experiences is made easier with the aid of intersectionality. Being a young person at school, Revathi faces age-specific bullying and discrimination. The mockery from boys at school points to how children and adolescents can be particularly harsh in enforcing gender norms.

"I wondered why God had chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me, and why He could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. Why am I a flawed being, I wondered often" (Revathi 15). These lines poignantly capture A. Revathi's profound uncertainty about her gender identity and reflect the intersectional realities of her experience. Revathi's question regarding why God subjected her to this "peculiar torture" exposes her intense internal turmoil and self-doubt about her gender identity. This shows how difficult it is for her to balance her sense of self with gender standards and expectations from society. The feeling of being a "flawed being" indicates internalized transphobia, where societal prejudices and negative attitudes towards transgender individuals are absorbed and directed inward. This internalization is a direct result of intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination. The reference to being "wholly male or wholly female" underscores the rigid binary gender norms that dominate society. Revathi's experience highlights the difficulty of living in a world that largely recognizes only two genders, leading her to question her own legitimacy and worth as a person who does not fit neatly into these categories. The problem faced by transgender people who are stigmatized as abnormal and outcasted from mainstream is depicted in the narrative. As a trans woman and a member of the hijra community, Revathi has experienced trauma and exploitation. Through her

narrative, she hopes to change perceptions of her community and draw attention to the importance of transgender rights. Her questioning of why God made her this way reveals the intersection between her personal beliefs and her gender identity. This intersection complicates her experience, as it involves reconciling deeply held beliefs with her lived reality. Her experience illustrates the challenge of navigating multiple identities including gender, cultural, and religious ones, which can overlap and make one feel insecure and selfconscious.

“Girls of my age, in flowing silk skirts and half-saris, their oiled hair braided elegantly and adorned with flowers, carried these rice-flour lamps. I was envious and wished that I too could somehow be part of that procession” (Revathi 11). In this line, we can analyse the gender norms that dictate specific roles, behaviours, and appearances for boys and girls. Her desire to be part of the procession reflects her internal identification with these feminine norms and her struggle against the expectations imposed on her as a boy. Revathi shows how deeply ingrained these gender standards by expressing her enthusiasm for the girls’ looks and her desire to participate in the procession. She judges her identity and worth against conventional norms of femininity even if she is aware of who she really is; this is an internalized effect of society gender expectations. The traditional attire and roles described in the passage have cultural significance, reinforcing the importance of gender roles within the community. Revathi’s exclusion from these roles illustrates how cultural practices can perpetuate gender binaries and marginalize those who do not conform. Intersectionality allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural and gender identities intersect and affect individual experiences. By analysing this through the lens of intersectionality, we can see how cultural, social, and psychological factors combine to the need for broader acceptance and inclusion of diverse gender identities in cultural and social practices.

1.2 Education as Liberation: The Role of Learning in A. Revathi’s Life

Revathi dropped school in 10th grade, because she was fed up being teased and not doing well in English subject. Revathi’s wish to become a woman was realized when she had the operation, but she continued to be open to society taking advantage of

the hijra community. Due to her lack of education, economic independence, and support from her family, Revathi was forced to turn to sex work and beg in order to survive, which left her open to verbal, physical, and sexual assault. “Sometimes, I wondered if I should continue to do sex work at all. But what else was I to do? I had no choice but to suffer it. I had to get used to living thus, not knowing what the day bring or what the morrow held for me” (Revathi 210). This line reflects the intersection of socio-economic constraints, lack of educational opportunities, and systemic marginalization. Analysing this through the lens of critical pedagogy reveals the broader societal forces that shape Revathi’s life choices and the limitations imposed on her. Systemic obstacles that restrict Revathi’s options are reflected in her withdrawal from sex trade. Investigating the obstacles that keep underrepresented people from obtaining good education and career possibilities, such as discrimination, a lack of supportive policies, and social stigma. Revathi’s narrative can be seen as a form of consciousness-raising, bringing attention to the harsh realities faced by transgender individuals. This awareness is the first step towards advocating for social change and inclusive policies.

My father did not know that I did sex work to earn the money that I sent him. I would tell my parents that I danced, that I did small comedy roles in films, that I posed for advertisements, as if I was asking for ice-cream... In the end, I never had much money. (Revathi 213-214)

It is analysed that Revathi’s lack of access to quality education underscores the barriers that marginalized individuals face. Education is often inaccessible or inadequate for transgender people, preventing from acquiring the skills and qualifications needed for more stable and respected employment. The necessity to engage in sex work to support her day-today life indicates severe socio-economic constraints. Proper education often provides a pathway to better job opportunities and financial stability, which was not available to Revathi. Despite her efforts, Revathi ends up with little money, highlighting the economic exploitation inherent in sex work. Her lack of education and career options puts her in a vulnerable and exploitative position where the risks and labour involved outweigh the potential

financial rewards. The need to lie to her parents and the constant financial struggle take a psychological and emotional toll on Revathi. Critical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of addressing the holistic needs of individuals, including their emotional well-being, which is often compromised by such precarious occupations. Revathi chose to relocate to Bengaluru in pursuit of employment, where she connected with the non-governmental organization Sangama, which promoted the rights of sexual minorities. She attended the NGO-organized activist meetings, where she learned about the significance of transgender rights and how they are necessary for the advancement of their social standing.

... I learnt a lot from the seniors in Sangama about sexual minorities, and about the minorities in general; about violations against Dalits and Adivasis; Hindu-Muslim differences and conflicts; the effects of wars waged by the large nations...I learnt of these matters in workshops, where they taught us in a manner that helped us understand, I was beginning to understand. I was beginning to understand what works was all about. (Revathi 242)

Through her story, Revathi shows how Sangama's educational initiatives assisted her in understanding the intricacies of societal injustices and the connections between different types of oppression. Revathi developed a comprehensive grasp of intersectionality through studying about sexual minorities, caste-based prejudice against Dalits and Adivasis, religious disputes, and the effects of war on a global scale. Understanding how various facets of identity and social positioning interact to produce distinct experiences of privilege and discrimination requires this insight. This educational approach aligns with the principles of critical pedagogy, which emphasizes active learning and critical engagement with social issues. The manner in which these workshops were conducted encouraging comprehension and reflection allowed Revathi to internalize the lessons and apply them to her own life and activism. Understanding the broader social and political contexts of marginalization helped her articulate her experiences and fight for her rights more effectively. This empowerment is a crucial aspect of educational pathways for marginalized individuals,

enabling them to challenge oppressive structures and seek social justice.

...I felt that it was wrong to be a hijra, and to do sex work. However, working in Sangama I was beginning to realize that none of it was my fault- the way the world perceived me and refused to accept me, ...The realization increased my desire to work for the rights of those in my community who had faced as much or more violence and difficulties than me. (Revathi 244)

Revathi recounts a pivotal moment in her life when she started to see herself and her place in society differently. Revathi's personal and activist path was greatly impacted by her realization of the larger disparities in society and rights of hijras, which she began to grasp through her activist journey with the NGO Sangama. By analysing these lines, there get an understanding that Revathi first battled internalized stigma related to being a hijra and doing sex work. She came to feel that her identity and work were intrinsically flawed as a result of society's unfavourable opinion and rejection. But her relationship with Sangama enabled her to confront and disprove these ingrained notions. As Revathi gained knowledge about the social constructions surrounding gender and sexuality and the systemic nature of discrimination, she started to realize that prejudices in society were to blame rather than her own shortcomings. Through Sangama, Revathi connected with others who shared similar experiences of violence, discrimination, and marginalization. This sense of solidarity was instrumental in her realization. Understanding that she was not alone, and that many others faced even greater challenges, galvanized her desire to work for the rights of her community. It shifted her perspective from one of individual struggle to collective advocacy. The support and education provided by Sangama exemplify how community-based organizations can play a crucial role in empowering individuals and fostering broader social change.

Sometimes I felt a glow of pride. I had wanted to study, get a degree and go to work, like other people. Of course, none of that happened.... There were so many things that I could be proud of, but I felt that this was about more than an individual hijra's success

it was a matter of pride for all hijras. (Revathi 246)

Sangama played a crucial role in Revathi's educational empowerment. Sangama is essential to her success in her schooling. The organization offered a forum for learning about the problems and rights of other oppressed groups, including hijras. This education was firmly grounded on activism and real-world experiences rather than purely academic. Through seminars, conversations, and encounters with other community members and activists, Revathi was able to develop a sophisticated grasp of human rights and social justice. It is analysed that, Revathi's narrative reflects on her non-traditional educational journey and the significant role that Sangama, played in her personal and professional development. Unlike the conventional academic route, she once aspired to, her education came from real-world experiences, activism, and community engagement. This analysis explores how her educational pathway through Sangama differs from traditional academic education and highlights its profound impact on her life. This pathway allowed her to gain practical knowledge and skills that were directly relevant to her work and personal growth. This exceptional educational opportunity underlines the value of community-based learning and the transformational power of education in empowering marginalized people and promoting social change. Revathi's narrative proves how education may influence individuals' lives and advance larger societal movements.

CONCLUSION

Through her autobiography, A. Revathi challenges the binary classification of sex, gender, and sexuality in contemporary society. The narrative sheds light on the difficulties faced by the hijra group. The author condemns the approaches used by the school, and family, among other societal institutions, to uphold the status order. Transgender people are pushed to the periphery of society because they defy the dominant norms of heterosexuality, femininity, and masculinity. The hijra community faces violence, humiliation, and discrimination in their daily lives as a result of their marginalized status. Through their involvement with organizations like Sangama and other NGOs, Revathi was exposed to a different kind

of education that empowered them to challenge societal norms and advocate for their rights. Revathi's realization that her identity as a hijra was not at fault, but rather the world's perception of her, was a transformative moment facilitated by the critical pedagogy practiced at Sangama. These educational pathways were crucial in their personal development and activism. They allowed Revathi to move from positions of marginalization to becoming vocal advocates for transgender rights. Her work in conducting workshops, engaging with educational institutions, and challenging systemic injustices exemplifies the impact of critical pedagogy. It highlights how education can be a tool for empowerment and social change, particularly for marginalized communities. A. Revathi's autobiography offers insightful perspectives on the complex dynamics of discrimination and the role of education plays in promoting social justice and empowerment. Through embracing critical pedagogy and navigating their intersecting identities, Revathi not only changed her personal life but also made a major contribution to the larger Indian transgender rights movement. Her story serves as a testament to the transformative potential of education rooted in critical awareness and social justice. In April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court of India granted official recognition to hijras as "third gender", to be situated under the OBC category of reservations in educational institutions and workplaces. At one level, this verdict was lauded for its progressive approach to gender identity. The judgement by providing reservation to *hijras* under the OBC category would improve employment opportunities for their community, if it is rightfully exercised by the potential workplaces. However, objections against the court judgement were raised by the members of the larger transgender community that includes trans men and trans women who do not identify as hijra, as they feared being clubbed under the umbrella of "third gender". Moreover, the court did not specify on what basis, the government shall identify hijras, making the process liable to misuse. Further, the Supreme Court judgement erased the caste privileges of *savarna* (upper caste) hijras which was objected by the Dalit (lower caste) hijras (Bose 132133). Thus, attitudes regarding the *Hijra* population have gradually changed in India in the modern day. The

autobiography of A. Revathi provides a rich foundation for further research in several key areas. These areas can offer deeper insights into the complex interplay of gender, caste, education, and activism in shaping the lives of transgender communities in India. Some avenues for further study are; Further research could explore the subtle experiences of transgender individuals across different caste backgrounds. A comparative analysis of the intersectional realities faced by transgender individuals in various regions and communities of India would shed light on how caste and gender intersect to create unique challenges and opportunities. While Revathi's experiences focused on the transformative potential of education, more detailed studies could examine the specific educational policies and practices that facilitate or hinder the empowerment of transgender communities. The studies of transgender experiences in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Nepal could offer a deeper understanding of the regional dynamics of gender identity and expression given the cultural and historical commonalities in South Asia. Additionally, this could draw attention to international best practices and inclusion and advocacy strategies. An in-depth examination of the economic opportunities available to transgender individuals could identify obstacles and facilitators to their financial independence. Analyses of employment laws, programs for vocational training, and business ventures that assist transgender people in sustaining their livelihoods could include. Even though there are more transgender autobiographies, they are written in their regional language. I aim to explore the translated version of this autobiography as my core subject is English.

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