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Deconstructing Stereotypes: Re-presentations of *Hijra* Identity

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Abstract: Most often the understanding of our own identity is fluid and tolerant, but the identity of the “other” is defined in stereotypical terms and edges towards caricature. Such narrow vision results in the construction of a fixed identity of the person or group thus categorised. Though the Supreme Court of India in its judgement in April 2014 gave legal recognition to the transgenders as constituting the third gender, most of the transgender individuals remain invisible and live at the margins of society. Laxminarayan Tripathi and Manobi Bandyopadhyay in their autobiographies challenge the various sites of power that attempt to render them invisible.

Keywords: Gender, Stereotype, Identity, *Hijra*

The labels of “man” and “woman” often seem inadequate to define the experience of being a *hijra*. The experiences of a transgender person are varied and complex. It cannot be simply reduced to the ideological notions of binary gender. The field of transgender studies is:

[C]oncerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood. (Stryker 3)

Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble* (1999) writes: "Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of 'men' will accrue exclusively to the bodies of men or that 'women' will interpret only female bodies" (10). This can be best elucidated in the performativity of *hijra* identity. *Hijra* identity deconstructs the norm of binary gender identity. The idea that one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender restricts gender identity to the binary pair of male and female. It constructs the category of "masculine" and "feminine" in heterosexual terms. Thus, the binary gender relation is rendered universal through compulsory heterosexuality. Such constructed identities are gradually and very subtly established as normal and natural for everyone.

Identity is not monolithic in nature. Rather, it seems to be constructed through discourses essentially embedded in relations of power. Identity is a complex structure that intersects with gender, sex and sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, age, etc. The identity of an individual is also determined through appearance, behaviour and stereotypes deep-rooted in our unconscious mind. Michael Pickering notes that stereotypes operate as "socially exorcistic rituals in maintaining the boundaries of normality and legitimacy" (qtd. in Nayar 124). Stereotypes often cater to the mass image and form an important or integral part of the representation. To a large extent, it reduces the 'other into a set of unchanging attributes and "by reducing the 'other' to one set of knowable features – the 'criminal' ... society preserves its 'self' from ambivalence" (Nayar 125). Stereotypes function in making invisible diverse gender identities.

According to Richard Dyer, the effectiveness of stereotypes lies in the way in which they demand unanimous approval:

Stereotypes proclaim, 'This is what everyone – you, me and us – thinks members of such-and-such a social group are like' as if these concepts of these social groups were spontaneously arrived at by all members of society independently and in isolation. The stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group as if that agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype. (14)

The multiple voices are coerced into univocal voices. Heterogeneous identities and plural voices are yoked together into a unified identity. It is due to the internalisation of a common set of beliefs

by a group of people. Such an internalisation deeply conditions the individual and at the same time becomes deeply rooted in the mind of an individual.

Transgender individuals are also condemned for not possessing a politically correct body. Kate Bornstein argues that the gender system in culture is malignantly and divisively constructed and "made all the more dangerous by the seeming inability of the culture to *question* gender, its own creation" (12). Cultural norms are created on the basis of observation and not a conversation. The fixed notion of gender becomes an ascription and does not remain confined to individual experience. The gender identity of a person is assigned at birth itself. There are fixed rules of gender which are modelled as natural. It is assumed that there are only two genders (male and female). One's gender cannot be changed as genitals become the markers of gender. No one is allowed to break these rules.

Laxminarayan Tripathi and Manobi Bandyopadhyay deconstruct the established norm of binary gender identity through their autobiographies. They appropriate and dismantle the stereotypical notions, established over decades, which have come to define the entire *hijra* community. Laxmi broke the stereotypes often associated with *hijras*. Often *hijras* are considered incapable of achieving greater heights. Laxmi is one such *hijra* who kept the key to control her life with herself. That a *hijra* can be self-empowered still comes as a surprise to most people. As the chairperson of DAI Welfare Society, an NGO that works for the *hijra* community in Mumbai, she became the first *hijra* to be invited to participate in a conference organised in Mumbai. She writes: "I felt empowered, and empowerment is not a word that normally exists in the vocabulary of a hijra" (Tripathi 62-63). In 2006, Laxmi was invited to the Sixteenth World AIDS Conference, as a part of esteemed UN AIDS delegation, to Toronto, Canada. She was also invited by the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) for a meeting of the civil society task force. For this, she was given a diplomatic visa granting her the status of a diplomat. Laxmi was delighted. She writes: "A hijra from India had been accorded diplomatic status in the world's richest country! It only happened in fairy tales" (Tripathi 108). Laxmi also used all the public platforms and television appearances that came her way to make society sensitive and aware that *hijras* are ordinary human beings and "to make viewers aware that hijras are normal people, just like them ... not extraterrestrial" (Tripathi 125).

Hijras are often stereotyped as ugly and dreadful. In order to reverse such stereotypes, Laxmi organised a beauty contest for *hijras*. She titled the event Indian Super Queen Contest. She writes: "If there are Miss India and Miss Universe contests for women, why not for hijras, I asked myself. Hijras are called born-clappers, but, for a change, we would get the world clap for us" (Tripathi 131). The event, though after many difficulties, became a huge success.

Laxmi also disrupts the codification of the profession in terms of gender. Laxmi loved to dance and chose dancing as a profession; a profession mostly thought to be pursued by women. Laxmi was often mocked at and ridiculed for taking up a womanly pursuit. She writes, "my flamboyance on stage made some people uncomfortable So I was teased. People began to call me a homo and a *chakka* All they could see was that though I was a man, my body language was that of a woman" (Tripathi 4). Overlooking all the rude comments, Laxmi not only learnt the classical forms of dance, but she also opened her own dance class at a very young age. Laxmi's choice of profession is similar to what Tyler chooses as a male nurse in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). He is the only male nurse in the town. Tyler knew of the bickering of the other nurses in his absence. He could easily sense the malevolence in the compliments that was passed to him by the female nurses: "Behind the flattery, the edge of mockery was plain to anyone who must, as a matter of survival, learn to detect it" (Mootoo 15). Tyler had become the talk of the town as the only male nurse. It suggests that the choice of profession is also governed by the normative discourse. Choosing dancing as a profession, Laxmi dismantles the stereotypical construct of dance as a female domain and also uses it as a tool to voice her dissent. She becomes a model-coordinator and goes on to perform in an album *Lavani on Fire*. Laxmi got her big break in Thomas Wartman's *Between the Lines* (2005). She has also been a part of television shows like *Dus ka Dum* (2008), *Sach ka Saamna* (2009) and *Big Boss 5* (2011).

Though in its landmark judgement, the Supreme Court of India on 15th April 2014 declared that:

Hijras, Eunuchs, apart from binary gender, be treated as "third gender" for the purpose of safeguarding their rights under Part III of our Constitution and the laws made by the Parliament and the State Legislature. Transgender person's right to decide their self-identified gender is also upheld and the Centre and State

Governments are directed to grant legal recognition of their gender identity such as male, female or as the third gender. ("NALSA v. Union of India and others" 109)

The judgement also instructed states to make reservations in the employment and educational sectors. But the benefits accorded to the third gender have not really percolated down to them. Apart from a few countable individuals the major population of the third gender community still live on the periphery and lead their life as "missing persons' or their country's lost property" (Tripathi 163).

Holiday Simmons and Fresh White in the article "Our Many Selves" in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community* (2014) writes:

THERE IS NO ONE WAY TO BE TRANSGENDER. We are teachers, scientists, business leaders, ranchers, firefighters, sex workers, weight lifters, students, activists, and artists. We are young and old, rich and poor, gay, straight, bisexual, and queer. We are every different race and we live in every country in the world.
(3)

But for *hijras*, their "deviant" gender identity appears to define their whole personality/being. That a *hijra* can become a clerk, student, teacher and politician seem foreign to most people. But gender becomes the defining identity marker for a transgender person. While dancing becomes therapeutic for Laxmi, Manobi Bandyopadhyay, India's first transgender principal, seeks emancipation through education. For Manobi, during her college life, what was most important to other students was her ambiguous gender identity. That she had far more knowledge of Bengali literature than any other student was of no concern. Her distinct appearance and behaviour shadowed her knowledge. She writes:

I realized that I was to again become the centre of attention and ridicule despite being a good student. I could not be called a man or a woman and that was far more important than the fact that I had read more Bengali literature than anyone else even before joining the undergraduate honours class. Clearly, my reputation had preceded me. (Bandyopadhyay 40)

Stereotypes also conform to the prevalent norms of society. They "not only allow societies to justify collective actions but also to justify

collective inaction as well" (Stangor and Schaller 22). The stereotypical portrayal of a social group is frozen in cultural representation. When a particular image is repeated over and over again in the cultural and social norms laid down by dominant groups, the image becomes representative of the group. Richard Dyer notes: "How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation" (1).

Manobi's experience as a lecturer in Vivekananda College, Jhargram, was perhaps one of the bitterest experiences of her life. On the very first day when she arrived to formally join the college as a lecturer, a hoard of harsh comments was hurled on her. Teachers and students were peering, trying to get a look of the "odd" person who had entered their college in the attire of a teacher. Some teachers ganged up against her and threatened to ruin her career, as they believed that "no hijra had the right to become a professor" (Bandyopadhyay 92). Their defence of the gender system was not limited to themselves, they also managed to convince other teachers that Manobi "was an aberration and that they collectively needed to force [her] out of the college. No one as lowly as a hijra should be allowed to teach in a college, share the same staffroom, toilet and facilities" (Bandyopadhyay 93). However, Manobi was determined not to be deterred by such threats.

One also needs to understand that violence or aggression meted upon sexual minorities can be linked to "common-sense assumptions of what constitutes "public" space, who has the right to occupy it, and how people should interact therein" (Namaste 141). The presence of a transgender person in the public sphere poses an ultimate challenge to the idea of the public sphere. The public space is tainted by the presence of a transgender person. Violence against the queer is not only about physical attacks. It is also about policing and monitoring an individual's gender presentation in the public space.

However, Manobi went on to become the first transgender principal in India. She was appointed as the principal of Krishnanagar Women's College, West Bengal in June 2015. Manobi never let any criticism overpower her intellect. She knew that it was only education that could emancipate and liberate her. She writes: "Somehow, I did not let my awakening sexuality affect my intellect; I would work hard to stay at the top of my class. ... win this unequal fight" (Bandyopadhyay 11). In a very tongue-in-cheek manner she narrates the reaction of people, on seeing her, on the first day of her college for the graduate classes: "Students

simply stood and gaped at this good-looking youth, in a long *kurta* and *salwar*, who, with a woman's gait and disposition, was headed towards the Bengali department. I definitely defied definition" (Bandyopadhyay 40). Manobi had no inhibitions in publicly asserting her identity and her femininity was quite apparent. She carried herself with confidence and no amount of jeering and taunting could discourage her from going to college to pursue and complete her higher studies.

The stereotypical construction of binary gender identity to a large extent influences the representation of *hijra* in our society. It thrives on normative construction of binary gender identity. The predetermined pattern of behaviour expected from every member of society is clearly laid out. The stereotyped image of a *hijra* gets written into or encoded into the cultural norms and in turn, determines the response of the members of the society towards those individuals who do not conform to the gender norms. Stereotypes are very subtle in implementation. One is often not conscious of its application. Stereotypes act as blinkers colouring one's judgement and perception of the "other" without oneself being aware of it.

Such stereotypical construction of the ideal has pernicious effects on those individuals who deviate from the norm. The failure or the inability to live by the normative gender rules of society often categorises such individuals who identify *hijras* as subhuman. The two narratives deconstruct the stereotypical notions about *hijras* and attempt to reconstruct the image of *hijras* as ordinary human beings.

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