

ESTABLISHING HIJRA IDENTITY: A TAKE ON LAXMI NARAYAN TRIPATHI

Paridhi Chaudhary¹, PhD Scholar²

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research Amity University, Noida.

ABSTRACT

LaxmiNaryanTripathi is a Hijra rights activist who have been born as a boy but always felt that she is a misfit into her body that she should have been a female instead. She was effeminate in mannerisms and dressing which was not acceptable by her family, friends, or the society. She faced tremendous problems at each step of her life. Yet, she never left fighting. She stood up for herself, for her family and proved to the society that no matter how different the society thinks she is, she is just another human being. Her immense patience, strength and thirst to prove her worth as a hijra made it possible for her to remove hijra taboo fiasco from the society.

Keywords: *Effeminate, Hijra, Identity, Misfit, Taboo*

The Hijras, known to be the Third Gender as stated by the constitution of India, are the people who do not follow the conventional roles of males or females as they have attributes of both genders. They are the people who are born as a different gender child but usually behave and feel a belonging to the other gender. For example: a boy child is born but he feels more associated with the feminine gender as has mannerisms which are long established as the bigotries of a woman like cooking, dancing, wearing make-up etc.

The status of Hijras is supposed to be quite high in Indian society as these people mark their presence since the mythical ages and have been a part and parcel of Indian tradition. Be it Ramayana or Mahabharata, the instances of Gods praising Hijras or becoming Hijras are very much a part of their tradition and hence their recognition is as old as the scriptures in India. Lord Rama granted the Hijras that they can curse and bless the men and women and that wish would always come true. Similarly, Krishna turning into Mohini to satiate the desire of Aravan for a night before his death is another example of Hijras in Indian mythology. (Pattanaik, Devdutt)

The Hijras were an essential part of Mughal empire and other empires because they were the most reliable and trusted patrons of the kings and were the great friends to the queens. Kings, deliberately, let the Hijras reside in the queen's palaces to help them in situations pertaining to danger or help. So, evidently they were good care takers and trusted folks who would directly report to the then kings. It was only after Britishers came to India that the status of Hijras was being snatched from them and that they were put in jails for being too different.

Hijras, being neither males nor females, lead a very confused life which is due to many reasons. First of all, they cannot associate with the gender they are born into. Hijras are not accepted well by the followers of conventional genders and thus live their life in stress, harassment and particularly shame. Hijras are usually harassed by their family members and at school or college are often treated with ridicule and are bullied. They are forced to leave

their families and homes as they cannot become a part of the society and thus live at the peripheries of the city with others like them.

The life of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi has not been easy either. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is a transgender rights activist, Hindi film actress and Bharatanatyam dancer in Mumbai, India. Transgender rights activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is proud of her sexuality and claims to be “a woman who can put all other women to shame.” Though she considers herself as a blessed Hijra as her family accepted her as she was and stood by her through all her life altering decisions. “I am a hijra and have been accepted by my family. This is rare in a culture where deviant sexuality is enough for parents to disown their offspring,” she writes. “They never stopped me from expressing myself,” she says. (Tripathi, Laxminarayan). She was a sick child with feminine longings. She was sexually abused by one of her own family member and then was raped again some weeks later. These sexual assaults transformed her and made her secretive and incommunicative. Later on she met Sangita auntie who thought that she understood the “different” nature of Laxmi. Sangita auntie felt that that Laxmi was a gay and thus has feelings for men.

“As the eldest son of my parents, they expected me to be a man. They expressed me to be manly, and eventually be the man of the house. I knew I couldn’t fulfil these expectations because, inwardly, I did not feel like a man. On top of that, I was gay. Even if my aberrations, society would not. I felt inadequate. I wanted to be addressed as a woman, not a man. I was in turmoil.” (37)

She helped Laxmi and told her about the man who was fighting for the rights of gays and lesbians in India, Mr Ashok Row Kavi who was a leader of gay men group. Laxmi opened up to explain him her problem, “I am effeminate and people tease me. I am also sexually attracted to men. Why am I not like everyone else? Am I abnormal?” (11). Laxmi was in fourth standard, even at that tender age Laxmi could realize that there’s something wrong with her, and that very issue bugged her. She couldn’t share this with her family because of the fact that there has always been a distance between parents and their child in India and the notion that what will the society think that their child is abnormal (gay) is always going to be a factor.

Ashok’s answer comforted the lost soul of Laxmi, “No, my child, you are not abnormal. You are absolutely normal. What is abnormal is the world around us.” (11) He advised her that Laxmi is too young to be thinking about all these things and that she should come back after her class tenth exams and then he would explain everything to him. As Laxmi started to get older she had many affairs with different men who end up hurting her eventually. By that time Laxmi learnt the fact that although she loved men and she could be gay but she wasn’t ready to accept her masculine body. Her trauma was so big that she wanted to end her life.

Slowly gradually, I came to the conclusion that I wasn’t a boy. I was a girl. But then I had a penis and testicles, not breasts. So how could I call myself a girl? I was bewildered. I didn’t have answers to these difficult questions. I wanted to end my life. (22)

Identity is not only a status of a person but is the very essence of one’s being. It is a part of our soul, which gives us comfort and strength to establish ourselves. If one is unsure of his identity then the person may live a life with undue trauma and stress. He would be depressed and even feel suicidal as was the case with Laxmi.

Meanwhile, amidst all the chaos and confusion, she decided to take charge of herself and she started to learn dancing and very soon opened her own dancing class. In those days, dancing was her only refuge, “Dancing transported me to another world where I could be my true self.” (23) Her teacher Baby Johnny taught her to

accept her femininity firstly during the dancing lesson and then even after the dancing lesson. She taught her “how to be myself, without compromising on my dignity and self-respect.” (25) This helped Laxmi to stand up but her sexuality was still a problem. Still the mental turmoil was a major part of her life from time to time as she had questions about her sexuality and her desires. She became a regular part of Ashhok’s gay group. The gays provided her with some solace but they all considered themselves as men.

“This brought me to the question of sexuality. I had learnt from Ashok Row Kavi that I wasn’t abnormal. But then, what was going on with my body? Though I was born as a boy, how come I fell in love with boys and not with girls? Slowly, gradually, I came to a conclusion that I wasn’t a boy. I was a girl.” (22)

After her school got over, Laxmi picked up courage to dress up in female attire. She started wearing lipstick, grew her nails, and wore rings. This was the time when she got free from her own shackles of sexuality and accepted who she wanted to be by becoming a drag queen. She started going at pubs and dancing. After making some contacts, she became a model coordinator. “In the world of glamour, no one looked at me with a curious eye.” (33) Being into this industry she wanted to bring out her sexuality and assert her sexual difference with utmost confidence. She liked being a drag queen and dressing up in female attire. But not for long, this also started to bother her as she wanted to drape a saree every day.

Through Ashok’s circle of people, Laxmi met a couple of Hijras. One of them was Sweetie who introduced Laxmi to the life of bar girls and bar dancing. Laxmi was a fan of dancing and bar dancing gave her a lot of money but it wasn’t good enough because she wasn’t interested in having sex with random men. The other bar girls were doing this because they had to support their families.

But where was I in all this? How could I fit into such a scenario? True, I didn’t have to support a family. But, I too straddled many worlds, without belonging to any. As the eldest son of my parents, they expected me to be a man. They expected me to be manly, and eventually be the man of the house. I couldn’t fulfil these expectations because, inwardly, I did not feel like a man. (37)

Then came the most important phase of Laxmi’s life, when she met Shabina. Shabina was actually a hijra who always dresses up in a saree. Just when Laxmi met Shabina she wanted to be like her. Laxmi learnt everything about hijras from Shabina – their history, their traditions, their lifestyle and their sources of income. She found out that “the word ‘hij’ refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called ‘hijra’.” (39) Laxmi began to realize that this is who she relates with. She wanted to become a hijra and she wanted Shabina to be her guru once she becomes a hijra.

That was the point when Laxmi’s life fell into place. From being not accepted by her own family to being sexually abused to being raped twice, and to being ridiculed by the society and friends. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi had faced so much so that a girl only can have nightmares of. Yet she never lost hope. She took matters in her own hands and tried to fight each battle of her life with utmost power and confidence. She is a transgender activist today and has been representing Indian transgenders throughout the world. She was the first transgender person to represent Asia Pacific at the United Nations and has represented her community and India on several international platforms including the World AIDS conference in Toronto. (Wikipedia)

WORKS CITED:

- [1] Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Shikhandi and other tales they don't tell you*(Penguin Books Limited, New Delhi, 2014)
- [2] Gokul. *Transcending Gender: Will the third sex ever be accepted by society?*,Imt-Iss, March 22, 2017, 12:30pm, IST
- [3] Tripathi, Laxminarayan. *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra. Trans. From Marathi original by R. Raja Rao & P.G. Joshi* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi. 2015)
- [4] De, Shobha, Mumbai Mirror, March 20, 2017, 11:15 pm, IST
- [5] Baghchi, Kaushami, *I, Eunuch: Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, Official ZEE Jaipur Literature Festival Blogger, Jan 25, 2016.