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**Gender Geometry: A Study of A. Revathi's
Autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story***

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Abstract:

*This paper proposes to study the process and effect of heteronormative gender colonization that the hijra community of India witness, by taking into account the autobiography of A. Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*. The autobiography "is the first of its kind in English from a member of the hijra community" and it clearly shows how the hijra community of India suffers lingual, sartorial and economic colonization at the hands of this heteronormative society. It is a travelogue of travails but the intention of the author is not to "seek sympathy from society or government", but rather to make this heteronormative society aware of the fact that the hijras are also human— hijras also have feelings, they too want to be loved and accepted, they too want to live.*

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In a heteronormative patriarchal social setup, the geometry of gender always resembles a circular figure where the central co-ordinates are assigned to the 'male' gender, thereby placing the 'female' gender at the periphery. Feminists opposed this 'central-periphery' binary and demanded relocation of co-ordinates. But, with the emergence of the Gay, Lesbian, Queer and Transgender studies, this entire circular geometric structure of heteronormative gender studies was critically questioned and challenged, so as to reconfigure the entire geometric orientation of gender. Since 'gender' is a social construct and operates within a language system based on binary oppositions, so while discoursing anything related to gender, one normally moves within the socially approved axes of either male or female gender, ignoring most of the times the existence of legally approved(?) 'third' gender or the 'transgender'. Thus one of the grass root level struggle of the transgender community is the struggle for a dignified social recognition of the transgender community as an independent existing gender category. And that dignified social recognition can only be achieved if language is newly constructed and framed so as to incorporate the existence of third gender as a normal, socially approved, dignified gender category. Stephen Whittle in the Foreword to *The Transgender Reader* points out:

[...] trans as a stand- alone term did not come into formal usage until it was coined by a parliamentary discussion group in London in 1998, with the deliberate intention of being as inclusive as possible when negotiating equality legislation. Cultural spaces and historiographies are constantly reframing the community, the identities, the cultures, and the language. We see new languages being developed constantly; for example 'per' as a pronoun was developed by UK community members with non-existent gender identities, and similarly the US term 'hir' for those who have both. (xi- xii)

But the question that arises is that how many of us are aware of such pronouns like 'per' and 'hir', let alone use them? Even though transgender identities have legal approval, and is currently enjoying much attention in the academic domain— "Trans identities were one of the most written about subjects of the late twentieth century" (Whittle xi)— but the ground reality narrates

a saga of social discrimination and psychic torture. This paper therefore proposes to analyse the multilayered process of gender colonization that the ‘hijra’ community of India endures, by taking into account the travelogues of travails that A. Revathi presents in her autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* — the first of its kind in English from a member of the hijra community.

The autobiography begins with a Preface, where A. Revathi clearly mentions the intention behind writing this book:

As a hijra I get pushed to the fringes of society. Yet I have dared to share my innermost life with you--- about being a hijra and also doing sex work [...] My aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires [...] I hope now that by publishing my life story, larger changes can be achieved. I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the rights to live in this society. (v-vi)

Born as the youngest male sibling in the family of three brothers and a sister, A. Revathi was initially baptized as Doraisamy. Now, while referring to Revathi’s earlier childhood phase as Doraisamy, one gets perplexed when it comes to the choice of pronouns— whether to use ‘he’/ ‘she’, ‘his’/ ‘her’— because in the binary system of language there is no pronoun as such to cater to the need of the so called third gender or the transgender. This absence of pronoun signifies the fact that the transgender have only an epistemological existence without any ontological existence. And this absence of ontological existence is one of the main reasons of their being otherised and colonized by the heteronormative society.

It was Lacan who for the first time analysed the cause of language being highly gendered. Lacan being a poststructuralist psychoanalyst is of the opinion that the unconscious of an individual is structured like language, where a signifier acquires meaning only through a system of differences. All this system of differences is governed by the law of presences, where phallus is symbolic of presence. This is what is known as the ‘Law-of-the-Father’, which governs this ‘plallogocentric’ world. Thus, when a child is exposed to language during his ‘symbolic phase’,

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he just takes a 'subject position' in this greater realm of language. He cannot alter the gendered nature of language because it is already there. This notion of Lacan influenced the French feminists and they talked of creating *écriture feminine*, 'women's language' which would be markedly different from the "Man Made Language" (Dale Spender). Thus it was the French feminist theoreticians in particular, in seeking to break down conventional, male constructed stereotypes of sexual difference, have focused on language as at once the domain in which such stereotypes are structured, and evidence of liberating sexual difference which may be described in a specifically 'women's language'. Similarly, the third gender needs to create a 'language of their own' to specifically address their desires and problems and there by break away from this lingual colonization.

Doraisamy, being born with the 'body' of a male was expected to behave like a male by the heteronormative society. But Doraisamy's 'male body' nurtured the desires and passions of being a 'female'. He/ she (?) always felt that a woman is trapped within a man's body:

A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. [...] I wondered why God had chose 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 [...] and all the time I was obsessed, confused and anxious. (15)

Revathi in the autobiography narrates multiple incidences to show how passionately Doraisamy wanted to dress like a woman and how he/she (?) enjoyed playing the role of female characters on stage during the school annual day celebration or how he/she (?) enjoyed putting on the "Female disguise" (16) during the celebration of the Mariamman festival in their village:

As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I was a shy bride, my eyes to the ground [...]" (4) "In class, I would sit staring at the girls, taking note of the way their braids fell, the intricate knot of their colourful ribbons, the jasmine and kanakambaram they wore in their hair, and their skirts and blouses. I longed to be like them and suffered that I could not dress so." (6) "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.” (9) “In my kurathi’s garb, I could express all those female feelings that I usually have to suppress and so felt happy [...] I had not worn a disguise I said to myself; I had given form to my real feelings.” (14-16)

Thus, ‘dress’ being one of the major and perhaps the most important marker of heteronormative gender distinction, ‘cross dressing’ or transvestism is regarded as the primary source of desire fulfilment by the transgender community.

When Doraiswamy for the first time came to know about the existence of people like him/her (?), the first and the foremost emphasis was on the fact that they “wore saris” and then the focus was on the fact that they had “an operation” (18). This emphasis on the gender specific dressing pattern suggests how subtly through the binary sense of dressing pattern, the heteronormative society actually creates a hegemonic discourse to strengthen its colonizing process over the marginalized third gender community. The third gender as such does not have any specific set of dressing pattern. So during the initial years of his/her (?) life, the transgender people cannot help but oscillate between the male and female dressing pattern and thereby unavoidably conforms themselves within either of the two socially approved gender category. And it is this forceful unavoidable submission of the third gender to the ‘grand narrative’ of heteronormative dress code which speaks volumes about their colonized state.

Even within the hijra community itself, dress code is not just so innocent. It is highly emblazoned with motifs of hierarchy and power game. The elders of the hijra community when accepts a newcomer like Doraiswamy for the first time as a *chela*, it is a compulsion “that a feminine man offers respect to the sari-clad and earns their goodwill (21)”. So, the “sari-clad” women within the hijra community enjoy a special status of respect. Revathi while narrating in details the customs and rules of the hijra community also refers to the importance of dress to earn respect:

If born a pottai, and when living amongst pottais, it is important that a person pierces her ears and nose, grows her hair. If you merely wear press-button earrings and a wig, no one really respects you. Likewise, if you happen to see a

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man crossing your path, you're expected to make way for him, bend your head bashfully and make sure that your chest is covered. (47)

Thus even if it is accepted that hijras are neither wholly male nor wholly female in the strict sense of the term,— (though the notion of the possibility of being 'wholly' male or female is now contested)— but it is a compulsion that they must put on dress that signifies a homogeneous gender identity. Strangely enough, heterogeneity or 'fluid gender identity' is not entertained even within a community which is necessarily heterogeneous in nature. This is perhaps the result of sartorial colonization, and it is high time that this colonized state be addressed and thus reformed to free the third gender from another clutch of heteronormative gender colonization.

Added to lingual and sartorial colonization, the transgender community is miserably colonized economically. In India, the most common sight of a hijra is to see them either begging in a market place or in a railway station or to see them in groups going for "*doli-baddai*":

Hijras play dholak, sing and dance, and this is called *doli-badhai*. They do this at weddings and during childbirth. People give them what they can afford --- rice, wheat, a sari. Hijras find out where there's been a birth and send word to the family, saying that they would arrive on such-and-such day to bless the newborn and they must be given baddai [...] Similarly, hijras go to marriage halls and sing and dance, teasing the groom and bride, which pleases them, and they too give money. (47)

Now, one would very easily get tempted to accuse and blame the hijra community for choosing the life of a beggar, but does one ever acknowledge the truth that a hijra is never allowed to enter the main stream economy in whatever form it may be? Such is the social stigma that a hijra can never be accommodated within an economic circle which would promote their economic independence. It is not that they are inefficient to carry out jobs other than begging and sex work, but the otherization is due to the fact of their being the third gender! Heteronormative society is tactful enough in perpetuating its hegemonic gender discourse. Why is it that we don't find any shop where a hijra is its owner or if not an owner at least an attendant? Have we ever met any hijra taxi/ auto/ bus driver? Sadly enough the answer is a big NO! If this is the scenario of private entrepreneurship, can one expect a different scenario in government sector or in academic

domain? Let us start from analysing the very first step that one needs to follow before getting a job: filling in of application form. In India the application form for any government jobs necessarily maintain a column specifying the gender of the applicant, but that specification is clearly stated to be either a 'male' or a 'female'. So at the very beginning it is assumed that there cannot be any eligible candidate contesting for the job whose gender preference is different from that of a male or a female. This very negation of allowing the hijra community to take part in productive economic output makes them all the more an object of rejection and derision. The tragic part of the story is that it is society who denies them entry into main stream productive economy, and it is society itself who curses them for living a parasitic life!

The hijra community in India is thus enmeshed in the mire of lingual, sartorial and economic colonization. And it is A. Revathi who through his/her (?) autobiography, for the first time, bravely attempts to challenge and break this cyclic process of gender colonization and heteronormative discourse. To narrate the everyday life of a hijra was not so easy, it was not so easy to re-live all those moments of agony and brutal torture, but Revathi took the trouble to do so only with a hope that after the publication of this autobiography, a hijra is no longer "stared at" and "laughed" (83) but rather considered as a human being:

Men and even women stared at us and laughed, and heckled us. I realized what a burden a hijra's daily life is. Do people harass those who are men and women when they go out with their families? Why, a crippled person, a blind person—even attract pity and people help them. If someone has experienced physical hurt, they are cared for both by family and by outsiders who come to know of it. But we—we are not consider human." (83)

How long will this so called 'tolerant' 'progressive' society take only to accept the hijras as human beings who feels — a person who wants to be loved and accepted, a person who wants to live? Cannot this heteronormative society allow an individual to live a life of dignity only because he/ she (?) do not fit into the existing gender geometry? Can we not hope to draw a new figure of gender geometry? Hopefully we can!

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Mousim Mondal is an MA in English from The University of Burdwan (2009-2011). She has qualified UGC (NET) in September 2012 and has also been selected for the award of MAULANA AZAD NATIONAL FELLOWSHIP [UGC] for the year 2012-2013. Presently Ms. Mondal is pursuing her PhD (Course Work) in The Department of English, The University of Burdwan since 18.03.2013.