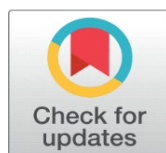
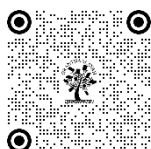


SUBVERSIVE PERFORMANCES AND GENDER IDENTITY IN A. REVATHI'S THE TRUTH ABOUT ME: A HIJRA LIFE STORY (2010)

Dr. Indu Swami ¹, Priyanka Raya ²

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Assam University, Diphu Campus, Diphu - 782460, Karbi Anglong, Assam

² Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Assam University, Diphu Campus, Diphu - 782640, Karbi Anglong, Assam



Corresponding Author

Dr. Indu Swami,
induswamionline@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the performative nature of gender identity through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and its application to transgender narratives, specifically A. Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010). It examines how Revathi's lived experiences challenge the traditional binary framework of sex and gender by exposing the socially constructed and fluid nature of these categories. Drawing on Butler's theoretical framework, the paper highlights how repeated performative acts, encompassing language, attire, and behavior, shape and affirm gender identity, revealing it as an ongoing cultural process rather than an innate essence. Revathi's narrative, including her struggles with gender dysphoria, her journey toward self-acceptance, and the transformative impact of sex reassignment surgery, underscores the ways transgenders disrupt heteronormative notions of coherence between sex and gender. Furthermore, the study situates Revathi's experiences within the broader socio-cultural context of Indian transgender communities, examining how societal norms and historical perceptions influence the performance of gender. By analyzing Revathi's life story, this paper concludes how transgenders use performance to navigate, resist, and redefine culturally imposed gender roles, thereby affirming Butler's assertion that gender is a stylized and iterative construct, rather than an inherent reality.

Keywords: Sex, Gender, Performance, Transgender, Butler, Gender Dysphoria

1. INTRODUCTION

"Individuals are denied their rights in the name of sex, sexuality, caste, and religion... I am one such individual who has been marginalized because I was born a male and wanted to live my life as a woman" (Revathi, 2010, p. v).

Adrienne Rich's idea of compulsory heterosexuality highlights how society pushes the idea that being heterosexual is the only "normal" way to be, and along with that comes strict expectations about how men and women should behave. These expectations have traditionally tied gender to biological sex, with the assumption that being male or female automatically dictates how one should act. However, newer ideas about sex and gender challenge this by showing that gender is not something set in stone or determined by biology. Instead, it's a social construct, something we learn and perform through the way we act, dress, and interact with others. For transgender people, this idea is especially important

because they challenge the notion that sex and gender must match in a certain way. They show us that gender is more of a process—a series of actions and choices that are not dictated by biology. As Simone de Beauvoir (1989) famously said, "One is not born a woman, but becomes a woman," (p.301) emphasizing that gender is not an innate trait but something shaped by society and experience. This idea helps to break down the notion that there's only one way to be a man or a woman, and invites a more open, fluid understanding of identity that does not rely on rigid, fixed categories.

This idea of gender as a fluid, social construct connects directly to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she expands on the idea that gender identity emerges through repeated social performances rather than being a fixed trait. According to Butler, gender is not a singular, natural act but something we do repeatedly through actions, gestures, and behaviors that align with socially accepted norms. These repeated performances, over time, create the illusion of a stable gender identity (Butler, 1990). Thus, gender, rather than being an innate characteristic tied to biological sex, is a social process—something we continually enact, perform, and express, often without conscious awareness, shaping our identity through each act and behavior (Butler, 1990). The idea that gender is constructed through repeated acts connects to Rich's critique of compulsory heterosexuality by showing how societal norms and expectations shape and reinforce what is considered "acceptable" gender expression.

In various transgender narratives, the assumed coherence between "sex" and "gender" is often questioned and challenged through acts, gestures, and performances that denaturalize this binary relationship. Transgenders do not necessarily identify with the "sex" assigned to them at birth and use various forms of performance to express their gender identity. The term "transgender" was first introduced by Virginia Prince, a self-declared cross-dresser and advocate from Southern California, who championed freedom of gender expression. However, the term gained its contemporary meaning after appearing in the title of Leslie Feinberg's influential pamphlet, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*. According to Susan Stryker (2008), a transgender person was defined as "somebody who permanently change[s] social gender through the public presentation of self, [with] or without recourse to genital transformation" (p. 4). Feinberg, however, extended the term to a more political context, advocating for a unified alliance among all individuals marginalized or oppressed for diverging from social norms of gendered embodiment. Feinberg envisioned "transgender" as an inclusive, pangender umbrella term, encompassing transsexual individuals, drag queens, cross-dressers, masculine women, and others willing to identify with the term. This movement, rooted in Feinberg's vision, profoundly influenced public discourse on transgender issues for over a decade, emphasizing the need for social, political, and economic justice.

In India, transgender individuals are referred to by various terms, with "Hijra" being the most common. The existence of Hijras in Indian society can be traced back to antiquity, with the concept of 'Ardhanarishvara'—a deity embodying both male and female principles. Historically, they were regarded as bearers of blessings and fertility and served as confidants, musicians, and performers in Mughal courts. However, societal changes and modernization have altered these traditional roles, leading to a re-evaluation of their place in contemporary culture.

The transgender community, through its writings and theorizing, has sought to provide an insider's perspective on how trans people understand and navigate gender issues. Historically, transgender individuals in public discourse often took on the role of apologists, defending their existence and experiences against societal misunderstandings. However, a significant shift has occurred, marking the emergence of a new form of transgender performativity and textual expression. Today, transgender individuals are not just participants in the conversation on gender but are also shaping it as theorists. They critically engage with and reinterpret the idea, the word, and the signifier "gender," offering fresh insights that challenge traditional norms and expand our understanding of identity and embodiment (Stryker, 198).

In India, several transgender individuals have courageously documented their struggles, reflecting on their assigned sex and the gendered identities they ultimately perform. These narratives commonly explore themes such as challenges against societal norms, journeys to self-acceptance, and the creation of distinct identities. For instance, Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* (2007), the first autobiography by a transgender person in India, chronicles her journey of self-discovery and gender performance. A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me* (2010), originally written in Tamil and later translated into English, provides a poignant account of her life as a hijra, grappling with discrimination and the complexities of sex work. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's autobiographies, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) and *Red Lipstick* (2016), delve into her childhood, her journey as a hijra, and her role as an activist. Similarly, *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) by Manobi Bandopadhyay, India's first transgender college principal, co-authored with Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, examines the challenges of navigating an unaccepting society. Akkai Padmashali's *A Small Step in a Long Journey* (2022)

recounts her fight for acceptance and equality as a transgender rights activist. Adding to this body of work, *The Yellow Sparrow* (2019) by Shanta Khurai provides a deeply personal account from the Northeast Indian state of Manipur.

Building on the ideas discussed, this paper explores how the act of performance reveals the ways in which transgender individuals challenge heteronormative notions of sex and gender. It aims to shed light on Judith Butler's concept of gender as a repeated social performance, rather than an expression of innate truth. The study focuses on Male-to-Female transgender A. Revathi and her deeply personal narrative as shared in her autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010).

2. DISCUSSION

Transgender individuals often experience gender dysphoria—a deep discomfort or distress caused by the mismatch between their true gender identity and the one assigned to them at birth. A. Revathi, born Doraiswamy into a Dalit family in a small village in Namakkal taluk of Salem district, felt this incongruence from a young age. As a child, Revathi naturally gravitated toward what were considered “feminine” activities—drawing kolam, helping her mother in the kitchen, and admiring the colourful ribbons, flowers, skirts, and blouses worn by the girls around her (Revathi, 2010). These behaviours were often dismissed by those around her, with remarks like, “He'll outgrow all these when he grows older” (Revathi, 2010, p. 4). Yet, despite the pressure to fit into societal expectations, Revathi couldn't ignore her true self. Reflecting on her childhood, she writes, “I did know that I behaved like a girl; it felt natural for me to do so. I did not know how to be like a boy...” (Revathi, 2010, p. 7). This internal conflict vividly captures her early struggles with gender dysphoria, shaping her journey toward understanding and expressing her identity.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a helpful lens for understanding Revathi's experience. According to Butler, gender is not something we are born with; it's something we perform over and over through actions and behaviours shaped by societal norms. This constant repetition creates the illusion of a stable, “natural” gender identity. Butler (1990) writes, “Gender is a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions are obscured by the credibility of those productions... the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (p. 190). In other words, society enforces rigid expectations about how men and women should behave, punishing those who deviate. Revathi's story is a powerful example of someone who defies these norms, showing that gender isn't an unchangeable truth but something shaped and reshaped by how we act and how society reacts to us.

As Revathi grew older, she began to feel a deep, inescapable sense of femininity, as if she were a woman trapped in a man's body. This inner conflict was made even more painful by the fear that society would never accept her true self. During the Mariamman festival, when she played the role of Kurathi, dressing as a girl allowed her to finally express the feminine feelings she had long suppressed. For Revathi, wearing female clothes was not a disguise but a way to embrace her true identity. On the contrary, wearing male clothes felt like she was hiding who she really was.

Revathi's sense of belonging grew even stronger when she learned about other boys who wore sarees and had undergone sex reassignment surgeries. She was especially inspired by Amma from Dindigul, who had not only undergone the surgery but also wore sarees with pride. Revathi was taken into Amma's household as a 'chela,' where she could dress as she wished and, for the first time, truly feel at home. She began to grow her hair, understanding that long hair was an essential part of femininity, and feared that returning home might result in her family cutting it off. Wearing a saree without long hair, she felt, would bring dishonour to her new family.

In her efforts to pass as a woman, Revathi adopted the dress, language, and behaviours traditionally associated with femininity. Her experience echoes that of drag performers, who dress as women not just to imitate but also to challenge the idea of fixed gender identities. Like them, Revathi questions the notion of a stable, permanent gender identity. Judith Butler points out that imitation, like Revathi's, “gives us a cue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification—that is, the original meanings accorded to gender—and subsequent gender experience might be reframed” (Revathi, 2010, p. 187). Revathi's journey shows how gender is not something inherent but a series of performances, and in doing so, she challenges the traditional, rigid understanding of sex and gender as fixed and natural.

For many Male-to-Female transgender individuals, one significant way to affirm their identity is through sex reassignment surgery, often referred to as 'Nirvana.' A. Revathi shares her experience of undergoing this surgery, which was performed in an unhygienic environment, without proper medical examination or post-operative care. Despite these challenges, Revathi's primary desire was to remove the male 'object' that didn't align with her true self, and to finally live

as a woman, just like other women. After the surgery, Revathi felt a profound sense of relief and joy, describing her experience as feeling like a flower that had just blossomed. She reflects, "Before I got nirvaanam done, I was beset by a strange fear. I felt a pinprick of disquiet, going to the bathroom, or going out of the house. I could not think of myself as a complete woman. But now, all that was gone—the fear, the sense of unease that haunted me. Deep within myself, I recognized that I was now a real woman. And I felt joy about it" (Revathi, 2010, p. 92).

This passage highlights not only the immense emotional and psychological relief Revathi experienced after aligning her physical body with her gender identity but also connects to Judith Butler's understanding of the body as a dynamic entity, constantly shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts. Butler challenges the traditional view of the body as a stable, fixed object. She proposes that the body is a "variable boundary," which means it is not static but can change according to how gender and sexuality are understood and regulated by society. Butler argues that the body becomes a surface where societal norms and gender expectations are inscribed, and in this context, gender is a performative act—"a corporeal style, an 'act'... which is both intentional and performative" (Butler, 1990).

Revathi's experience of undergoing surgery and feeling complete can be seen as part of her performance of gender, in which the body is not only transformed physically but also aligned with her internal sense of self. This reflects Butler's notion that gender is not a pre-existing essence but something that is performed, constructed, and reaffirmed through acts and actions. Revathi's story, much like Butler's theory, emphasizes that the body is not a fixed entity but a canvas upon which society's norms and expectations are inscribed, and through this, Revathi was able to assert her gender identity in a way that felt both authentic and liberating.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the discussion shows how Butler's concept of performativity helps us understand how transgender individuals break away from traditional ideas of gender. Through the repeated actions, expressions, and performances of their true gender identity, they challenge the societal norms that try to define them. This process highlights how gender is not something fixed or innate, but rather a series of repeated acts that create the appearance of a stable, gendered self. By living and expressing their identities, transgender individuals reveal that what we often see as a fixed gender is actually something that is built through constant social actions. Through their personal experiences, they remind us that gender is not an inherent trait, but something that evolves through the way society sees and shapes us.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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