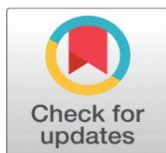
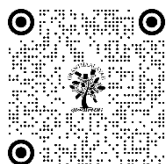


REDEFINING IDENTITY: THE INTERSECTION OF DISABILITY AND TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCE IN REVATHI'S *TRUTH ABOUT ME*

Mr. A Saleth Vensus Kumar ¹, Dr. M Richard Robert Raa ²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

²Research Supervisor & Associate Professor, Nehru Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India



ABSTRACT

Disability occurs not in terms of impairment but only by the means of how it has been perceived in the minds. This study examines the ways in which disability and transgender experiences overlap in the autobiography of Revathi's *Truth about Me*. This study aims to discover how the writer overcomes the diverse identities and the specific challenges she encountered using a thematic analysis. The analysis reveals that Revathi creates her identity in the face of social exclusion, exhibiting her agency and perseverance in the face of hardship. In order to understand the interconnected nature of her transgender and disability identities, significant concepts such as identity formation, societal attitudes, and personal resilience are investigated. By emphasizing the value of intersectional perspectives in comprehending the lived experiences of marginalized people, this work advances the areas of transgender studies and disability studies.

Corresponding Author

Mr. A Saleth Vensus Kumar,
vensusvensus@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality is a critical concept that recognizes how individuals hold multiple identities and face unique challenges at the intersection of those identities. The Oxford Dictionary defines intersectionality as the way in which social categories like gender, race, and class relate to each other and to a particular person or group, resulting in overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination. The idea was first presented by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her groundbreaking essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989). Using the word, Crenshaw drew attention to the experiences of Black women, who are frequently left out of the mainstream of both anti-racist and feminist movements. In addition, she takes a chance to explain that every person's identity is multi-dimensional, because

social identities are overlapping and intersecting, there is no purest notion of identity. Using an intersectional perspective can aid in the comprehension and navigation of the challenging issues.

Revathi's *Truth about Me*, is a moving account of her experiences growing up as a transgender woman in India. The research article investigates into the text to understand how the author overcomes her multiple identities and the specific challenges she faced. "I realized that no one understood my problems. I was both a hijra and a person who had to deal with physical challenges. This duality shaped my life in ways that others could not comprehend" (Revathi, 2010). Understanding intersectionality is a cornerstone in fostering inclusivity and equality for all individuals, especially those facing numerous forms of oppression. "Telling my story was an act of defiance. It was my way of saying that people like me exist and that our stories are worth telling" (Revathi, 2010). The research article also aims to advocate for more inclusive narratives in literature by emphasizing Revathi's story.

1.1. SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Identity formation is one of the most prominent topics in the literary treatise. The identity of the individual is defined not by his character, activities and the qualities but by the society. "Society is not a collection of individuals but a network of relationships, a set of social processes and interactions that shape and are shaped by human behaviour." (Giddens, 1984). A society is made up of social structures like class, race, and gender that organize and control social life, as well as a variety of institutions including the family, government, education, and religion. "Individual identities are formed and reformed through the interplay of personal experiences and societal expectations, norms, and institutions." (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Because society provides the cultural and social frames through which individuals view themselves and others, it plays a crucial role in forming individual identities.

1.2. SOCIETY AND THE CULTURE

In the contemporary society, understanding the gender identities and the sexual orientation have turned into the relevant part of cultural studies. India is a country well known for its variety of cultures, creeds and religious faith. As Giddens describes, "Society refers to a large group of people who live together in an organized way, making decisions about how to do things and sharing work that needs to be done. It is a complex network of social relationships, institutions, and cultural norms that shape the behaviours, attitudes, and identities of individuals within the community" (Giddens, 2006).

When there are two persons with the different ideologies, it is difficult to connect with the others through understanding each other. In our society, the good and the bad can never be determined because of the multiculturalism. As an individual, the person can create the identity as per their interest, but the acceptance from the society is pertinent, because the society will never consider the interest of an individual. Transgender individual is not satisfied with the gender assigned to them at birth, so they need a change, though the law permits them for the change, the society never accepts them, so from the beginning of their lives, they are very much confused and conflicted about their inner feelings and the identity. They don't see themselves in the way the society perceives and expects them to.

1.3. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Gender is a constantly changing and contested site of meaning. Transgender studies challenge the idea of gender as a natural, binary, and unchangeable attribute." (Stryker, 2006). Understanding that gender is a social construct that fluctuates throughout cultures and historical times rather than a fixed, binary trait is fundamental to transgender studies. "Transgender identities disrupt the binary thinking of traditional gender categories and highlight the fluidity and diversity of gender experiences." (Halberstam, 2005). Transgender studies look at the lived experiences of transgender people, including formation of identity, acceptability in society, and obstacles related to health and law.

"The intersectionality of transgender identities with other axes of difference highlights the multiplicity of oppressions and privileges that shape transgender lives." (Spade, 2011). In transgender studies, intersectionality is essential because it acknowledges that transgender people may encounter intersecting kinds of prejudice based on sexual orientation, race, class, and other social categories.

1.4. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EVOLUTION OF THIRD GENDER IDENTITIES

In our society, transgender people come in all colours, ethnicities, religions, and social classes, but because of who they are and how they are, they have never been able to live respected lives. They are forced to experience intense mental suffering, because of the fixed and forced customs in accordance with the sexual dimorphism in the recorded history. They experience inequalities caused by discrimination, social stigma, and the violation of their human and civil rights, and they are subject to pervasive discrimination in a variety of contexts, including housing, employment, social life, education, and health. Globally, numerous societies have acknowledged the gender identities beyond the binary constructs of male and female. In many indigenous societies, third gender identities are deeply ingrained in spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. With reference to Serena Nanda, the Hijra community is accepted as a third gender, they frequently involve themselves in the religious and cultural ceremonies like blessings during births and marriages.

2. TRANSGENDER AS A WOMAN

Numerous activists who identify as transgender have changed their gender according to their desires and needs. Transgender writers Kalki and Vidya are trailblazing individuals who have come forth to advocate for their community. By quoting the words of Simon De Beauvoir “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” (Beauvoir, 1953, p. 283). One initially identified as a male when he was born, but later changed to a female. She wanted to change her identification from male to female. According to Susan Stryker, Gender identity refers to how one feels and identifies oneself as a masculine or feminine. This can be best understood by experiencing the happiness by a particular pronoun they feel. “Each person had a subjective sense to fit with a particular gender category; this is one’s gender identity” (Stryker, 2008, p. 13).

Every human being born on this earth, has the right to live the life with freedom as they choose, and they have the ability to accept and reject the way of living and also to express dissatisfaction about the disturbing conditions. Vidya, in her autobiography, expressed her feelings that she could understand the reality but the voice of her inner mind stated, “No, I couldn’t live any longer as a man. If I could not become a woman, I’d rather die. I wasn’t confused now. I had come to a clear decision, and it bust out in words” (Vidya, 2015, p. 56).

B.R.Ambedkar says “We must stand on our own feet and fight as best as we can for our rights. So, carry on your agitation and organise your forces. Power and prestige will come to you through struggle,” (Moon, 1989) The Transformation of the transgenders in their life comes to reality through their perseverance and continuous struggle in creating themselves and the identity. The happiness is expressed through the lines of Vidya, “Amma; Amma, I have become a woman. I am not Saravanan any more, I am Vidya - a complete Vidya whole woman ... Radha, please Radha, I am no longer your brother Radha, I am your sister now, your sister ... Look at me, Appa. Look at me as a woman. Accept me as a girl, Appa.” (Vidya, 2015, p. 9)

Kalki stated joyfully as,

with heart’s joy brimmed
onto my lips
I hummed a tune
skipped a foot and
fluttered like a Butterfly. (Kalki, 2020, p.109)

2.1. TRAUMAS AND PLIGHTS OF TRANSGENDER

The transgender individuals were afraid of the mistreatment they would face from the general public once they disclosed their identities. When they express their gender identity at the early age, they frequently face rejection from their family, are confined to their home without access to education, and receive inadequate treatment for their physical and mental health. When expressing their gender identities later in life, people frequently run into rejection from social service agencies and the general public as they attempt to overcome gender conditioning.

The domination occurred to Revathi at many situations, the family became the first social institution to oppress and marginalize Revathi, because in Indian social order the transgender was the massive pitfall in the patriarchal world,

which restricted Revathi from participating in her family celebration. The trauma of the transgender had been explained by Revathi, as they had been brutally attacked by their guru and the man they loved, for the money. The society never provided them the chance to speak for themselves, the society marginalizes the transgender for violating and rejecting the natural gender and the identity, the family rejects them due to the society and their familial respect, the inspiration and the mentor, the gurus and the person, who was supposed to share the life, deceived them for the money.

2.2. TRANSGENDER AND DISABILITY

In some contexts, transgender individuals may be considered disabled to access legal protections and benefits. The World Health Organization (WHO) removed gender identity disorder from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) in 2019, replacing it with gender incongruence, it is no longer considered to be a mental disorder rather a sexual health condition. Transgender individuals often face mental health challenges due to societal pressures, discrimination, and a lack of access, these challenges can be viewed through the lens of disability.

3. REVATHI'S THE TRUTH ABOUT ME

Truth about Me. is an autobiography by the transgender activist and the writer A.Revathi. It is an account of the complexities and predicaments put up with the transgenders by the Indian society. This story brings out the lives of transgenders, their culture and ways of living and most importantly their hidden desires, dreams, aspirations and experiences. "I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable more than just begging and sex work." (Revathi, 2004, p. v) Predictions and prejudices always occupy the minds of the people before understanding what they are, the society was always in need of judging the people.

Revathi was named after Doraisamy, the youngest son in the family, he was pampered by the entire family with the utmost care and affection. Doraisamy felt as a woman in the body of a male. He was comfortable with the domestic works in the home as the girl children do. He preferred to dress like a girl but nobody in the family restricted his act, and they just approved of his activities with the consideration of childish desires. He describes,

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, and everyone would laugh. No one thought much of it then, for I was little. (Revathi, 2004, p. 4)

The feminine desires and the qualities in Doraisamy began to spark out as the days passed on. He was more interested to behave like a woman than a man, he had a secret passion towards feminine things,

A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered a man. I longed to be with men, but felt shamed by this feeling. (Revathi, 2004, p. 15)

Physically, Doraisamy was filled with the body of male but in reality, filled with the feelings of a female, which is he dreamt of. But he was also worried about the acceptance and the identity. The real identity must be a woman, because Doraisamy never experienced as a man, even at times, "As I re-emerged in my man's garb, I felt that I was in disguise, and that I had left my real self behind." (Revathi, 16) The male physique can do nothing with the feelings of a female, because, always the inner trauma comes out and occupies the whole thing.

Whenever, the feminine desires urge Doraisamy to act as a woman, he wished to transform himself into a complete woman, but he was perplexed about the consequences of the transformation, such as, identity creation and the social exclusion, but Revathi was filled with thought provoking question that has been mentioned in the work "A Life in Trans Activism", "Who am I? This was a question I often asked myself even as a child." (Revathi, 2022, p. 1) There was a confusion in the realization of the gender, a person with the male organ to be a man, but with the feminine qualities to be analysed. The question was later answered by Doraisamy with transformation as Revathi.

Now, Doraisamy had been transformed into Revathi, the desire has been fulfilled, Revathi adopted three daughters for herself, they were also the transwoman as Revathi and she found herself more interested in leading a family life with the husband and children. But she had to undergo a serious concern of acceptance from the family and the society in creating her identity. The family was not ready to understand her feelings and include her into the family as a woman, even, when her brother rushed with the stick, she was completely transformed into a woman, not in fighting back with him but with the excuses.

'Look! I've had an operation and I'm a woman now. From now on, I'll live as I wish. You can't beat me as before, you have no right to. Don't you know that there are laws in this land that'll punish you if you hit a woman? If you dare hit me, I'll go to the police,' I warned him. (Revathi, 2004, p. 113)

Instead of do battle with the brother, she has escaped herself with the excuse, the ardent feeling and desire to call herself as a woman in front of the family members happened with her determination with what she wanted.

The second level of acceptance was from the society. The society was not ready to accept the crippled identity of Revathi as a woman because of the limitation in the construction of gender. Revathi's aspirations were far beyond what society considered normal, the society and the culture were conceived by the mainstream society, Indian society is built on a multitude of cultures, ideologies, and ethnicities, the acceptance was from all the people seemed to be impossible for the aspirations. "I used to visited my sister at her village. The people there thought that I was her younger sister." (Revathi, 2004, p. 117-118) The people of the village accepted Revathi as a woman with her attire. In another situation,

One day, when I was on my scooter, waiting, I heard the auto-rickshaw drivers talking amongst themselves about me. One group was sure I was a man, the other group insisted I was a woman. One of the men in the first group said that I was big-built and no woman is that large, and no woman would wear the kind of clothes I wore or cut their hair as I had done. (Revathi, 2004, p. 228)

The understanding and describing the person only happens with the physical appearance, though Revathi had the feminine qualities from her childhood, but when transformed her attire, then only she became the woman she wished for.

"This world would talk ill not only of me, but of anyone who is not seen as normal, anyone who is disabled, anyone has been violated." (Revathi, 2004, p. 115) When someone is unique in their own way, the society ill treats them in a way, causing the person to feel inferior, which leads to the self-exclusion, Revathi, after the transformation as a woman, she was not allowed to use the public toilet for woman at the railway station, and was chased away by the police woman. For the society, the appearance alone can never satisfy, it is looking for something more to be proved. Revathi, being the transformed woman, she excluded herself from the society, so that she can stay out of the problems, as she describes, "I was petrified of being exposed and teased. What if I got angry and fought back? Then people at home would come to known of it and God knows what they'd say. I lived in the silent shadows, half hidden." (Revathi, 2004, p. 119)

The major problem faced by the transwomen is the survival, they were left with only three options as begging, blessing and indulging as sex workers, there was a limited source of income. Whatsoever, the talent of the person may be, nature of the work will be categorized by the gender, but there are no categories for transgender. Revathi, in her Preface to *The Truth About Me* writes, "As a hijra, I get pushed to the fringes of society." (Revathi, 2004, p. v) They were marginalised from the mainstream society with the limitations, they were not allowed to be educated, live with the common people and work as they wish. "I do not seek sympathy from society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the right to live in the society." (Revathi, 2004, p. vi)

3.1. EXPLORATION OF THE IDENTITY

Doraisamy being a male, never worried or ashamed to act like a female, usually, the boys never choose to a female character to be enacted, but he happily enacted a female character Chandramathi, he was very much enjoying the frame. Later, while studying tenth standard, he could able to feel the change of nature in the body and mind, as he was surprised and fascinated for his gender identity. The fascination to be a woman stated to grow in Doraisamy as he met a group of hijras, dressed up with a female costume and when he learnt about their habits, he changed his name into Revathi, transformed into a woman.

One of the most important things in the identical construction is accepting the things. When the person disguised himself as a woman by wearing women's costumes, the society need to accept them as a woman, instead they are considered as transgender. Indian society is constructed upon Indian mythology and the religion. In the spiritual context, Lord Shiva is considered as Ardhanarishwara, the combination of half Shiva and half Parvathi. In some situations, the people believed that the transgender people have the auspicious power to change things through the bless or curse.

4. CONCLUSION

The idea of discrimination is complex and relates to the unfair or biased treatment of persons or groups on the basis of specific attributes. Creation of identity is one such attributes created by the mainstream society, if it is not created by the individual based on their wish and need, there is a possibility of discrimination to occur in various forms, including exclusion, harassment, denial of access and unequal access to opportunities and resources.

The study of *Truth About Me* reveals the way Revathi's experiences with discrimination defined her identity and affected her sense of self and place in the world. "To be both disabled and transgender is to occupy a unique space, one that defies easy categorization but demands recognition and respect." (Revathi, 2004) Her narrative demands for a more accepting and compassionate society by exposing the pervasive nature of discrimination.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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