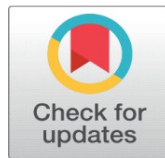


READING TRANSGENDER AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: EXPLORING IMPLICATIONS OF MALE GAZE ON HIJRA INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how autobiographical narratives in the Indian transgender discourse serve as influential tools that enable hijra individuals to offer insights into their lived experiences and complex identities. It focuses on the representation of the “male gaze” in their narratives and its consequent impact on hijra individuals. By analyzing two prominent autobiographies, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxmi and *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, this study investigates the manifestation of the “male gaze” on hijra individuals in addition to their experience of marginalization. Employing Norman Fairclough’s model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) alongside the conceptualization of the ‘male gaze’ as an analytical framework, this study analyzes and interprets language that has been used to reveal the societal prejudices and gendered preconceptions.

Keywords: Male Gaze, Hijra, Self-Representation, Objectification, Transgender Autobiography

1. INTRODUCTION

India is home to a fairly large population that comprises the third gender, or transgender, commonly known as a hijra. Hazarika defines a hijra as “an individual born biologically male but exhibiting feminine gender traits that situate them in a liminal space, termed as the “third gender” in society” (2021). They have been called various other names in the country, such as tirunangais, aravani, kinnar and more.

A majority of them belong to the hijra community, a distinct cultural group comprising transwomen individuals that follow a unique set of norms and live within heterosexual familial structures in which they take on feminine roles (Kalra, 2012).

Consequently, individuals belonging to transgender communities in India took to writing to bring out the issues and experiences of their communities to the forefront. Among such writers are members of the hijra community who have emerged from their marginalized shells to inform the world about their existence, their cultural ways, and origin.

Autobiographies served as a powerful platform for such writers and offered their readers a unique perspective into their lived experiences as a marginalized community, often advocating for themselves through the narration of their own experiences, which is closely intertwined with their sense of belongingness to such a community.

In the case of hijra autobiographies, it was observed that the hijra individuals shared similar experiences with men, which ranged from objectification to sexual abuse. Due to their feminine nature and the fact that a good number of them are engaged in sex work, they often fall prey to objectification and other atrocities perpetrated on them by men (Laxmi, 2015). They were gazed upon by men as objects they could derive pleasure from.

In the subsequent discussion, this research will undertake an investigation and critical examination of these issues and other prevailing assumptions in the selected transgender autobiographies titled *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* by Laxmi and *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi that concern the male gaze, to evaluate their theoretical relevance to the lived experience of transgender individuals.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The hijras in India belong to the transgender or third-gender category. A transgender person can be broadly defined as an individual “whose gender identity or expression does not align with culturally held expectations for people who share their assigned sex at birth” (King, et al, 2020). Buck (2016) emphasized that gender identity is the understanding of one’s own internal and psychological idea of gender. He also pointed out that this aspect of the gender identity of transgender individuals is often overlooked by their cisgender counterparts.

In 1990, Judith Butler, in her phenomenal book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, defined gender as an identity that is not fixed but is constituted through the stylized repetition of acts through time. Butler (1990) argued that gender “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”. This definition reflects Butler’s perception of gender as being performative and not an intrinsic trait or essence, which has been established as a result of repeated cycles of production and reproduction of stylized action.

Explaining the position of transgenders outside the male-female dichotomy about linguistic theory, Stryker (1998) shed light on the fact that in the recent time, it has “become socially significant that the signifier ‘gender’ does not reference a signified ‘sex’ in quite the direct way as assumed by the idea of a ‘sex/gender system’”.

In India, transgender narratives served as “a call for reformation in the diseased gender norms of our society” (Nair, 2021), primarily in the form of autobiographies. With the publication of the first trans narrative by A. Revathi in 2004 titled *Unarvum Uruvum* (*Our Lives, Our Words*), transgender autobiographies flourished in India in the twenty-first century (Preeti & Kaur, 2024).

Roy Pascal, in his well-known book titled *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, describes autobiography as “only one form among many in which a writer speaks of himself and the incidents of his personal experience” (2016). It is through autobiographies that a writer shares with his readers a piece of his personal life through words – a “self-portrait” (Howarth, 1974) which may influence the reader to view the experiences or events from the writer’s point of view.

Judy Sharkey (2004) points out how autobiographies go beyond personal narratives and are very much rooted in socio-political contexts. He also emphasizes the importance of critically analysing autobiographies and states, “We have moved beyond the romantic, uncritical celebration of stories to the recognition of autobiographies as complex political texts that, when not open to inquiry and contextual analysis, can reinforce dominant ideologies” (2004).

Baruah points out how a concept of dual consciousness of the self as culturally defined and as different from cultural definition is developed in transgender autobiographies. She alludes to the failure of transgender individuals “to recognize themselves in the reflections of cultural representations” (2016).

The primary focus of this study is to examine the implications of the male gaze on transgender individuals. Laura Mulvey, in her essay titled “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema” (1975), introduced the concept of the “male gaze” that highlighted the sensualizing and thus objectifying of women in films. She used psychoanalysis to understand how “pre-existing patterns of fascination” already present in an individual, who is shaped by societal frameworks, evoked the

“fascination of film”. The way film mirrored, exposed and employed the existing prejudices of “sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” has been taken as a point of reference.

In continuation with this model of the theory of the “male gaze”, Mulvey, in “Unmasking the Gaze: Some Thoughts on New Feminist Theory and History” (2001), drew attention to cinema as a visual art form that engaged the eye as its primary instrument of perception that contributed to the construction of “pleasure of looking” in the film’s narrative structures (p.5). The psychoanalytical aspect of feminist film theory alluded that the “pleasure of looking” further drew in “pre-existing biological or literal masculinity or femininity”. Mulvey emphasized that the influence of the film on the spectator’s identity was gendered and thus separated cinema from the external socio-cultural environment. She brought attention to the concept of the “gaze” as being the primary factor in the development of “modern subjectivity” that dictated the way the world around was perceived.

Mulvey examined how a balance is created as cinema plays an equal part in shaping and perpetuating the structures and conventions formed by the social and sexual factors external to it (2001). Hollywood largely popularized the image of women as a “screen spectacle”, which was witnessed in the embodiment of an erotically charged femininity in the character of a “dumb blonde” played by Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* released in 1953. In response to this eroticized femininity, a distinct “male gaze” was thus evoked (2001).

Corinn Columpar traced the “gaze theory” as being foundational across several disciplines, including film studies, gender studies, and cultural theory in “The Gaze as Theoretical Touchdown: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory, and Postcolonial Theory” (2002). In the essay, Columpar shed light on the pervasive influence of the gaze theory across such disciplines, focusing on its association with power dynamics, representation and identity. This added to the already established idea of linking the “male gaze” to patriarchal power, in which the power dynamics between men and women are set up in such a way that “men are invested with the power to look while women function primarily as image or object of sight” (Mulvey, 1975).

The theory of the “male gaze” did not entirely enjoy a smooth sail and invited criticism, especially from male theorists. Edward Snow, in his essay titled “Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problems”, threw light on an alternative perspective regarding the “male gaze” from the point of view of a male viewer (1989). Snow pointed out that the theory of the “male gaze” constructed an entirely negative image of the “male”, as “masculine vision” became synonymous with concepts such as patriarchy and phallocentrism (1989).

Being in the position of a male viewer within feminist theory, Snow expressed his discomfort and suggested that while it is necessary to uncover patriarchal movies, a theory such as the “male gaze” may backfire and, in turn, support the surveillance mechanism it wished to fight. He argued that focusing solely on “demystifying” these motives may overlook the elements of the gaze that resist being understood in terms of “patriarchal/ideological/pornographic motives” and end up strengthening patriarchal norms (Snow, 1989). He also warned against the idea of reducing the “masculine vision” to power dynamics, which could reinforce the existing systems of authority. Therefore, he suggested advocating feminism that acknowledged the internal differences to not risk perpetuating existing power dynamics (Snow, 1989).

Regarding the discussions surrounding the “male gaze” theory, Snow further expressed his interest in those aspects that did not fit into established theories, giving close attention to exceptions and alternate perspectives. He stressed that while having a theory is important, they run the risk of sticking to pre-established knowledge, limiting their analyses. Therefore, one must be willing to approach things with an open mind, which also includes revising initial assumptions (Snow, 1989).

Examining the male gaze theory from the lens of feminist post-structuralist discourse, Glapka (2018) explored the concept of the male gaze beyond the screen, in real life, by conducting an empirical study among female participants and examining the power dynamics that are inherent in the objectification of women. She linked the tendency of films to portray women as objects of male desire to its prevalence in society. She argued that the positioning of males is such that they exercise power and control, reducing women to passive subjects whose role is subject to the beauty standards of society and their ability to uphold them (Glapka, 2018).

Glapka also brought to our attention the mechanisms of language and rhetoric at work that play a major role in perpetuating the objectification of women (2018). Discourses around the subjects of femininity, sexuality or beauty are made and carried forward in a manner that begins to shape our ideologies in terms of gender, which creates room for

imbalance in the positions of man and woman. Glapka also called for an alternative discourse that focused on women's autonomy and agency, which paved the way for women to define themselves (2017).

Laura Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", called this phenomenon "a world ordered by sexual imbalance" where man has been assigned an active role in the "pleasure of looking" while the female has been assigned a passive role in the same (Mulvey, 1975). She described it as:

"...women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire." (Mulvey, 1975)

A hierarchy was formed, and a controlled narrative structure was built where men become the subjects of the narrative while women are reduced to nothing but objects of desire (Mulvey, 1975).

Taking this concept beyond the screen, a study on women being treated as sexual objects to be looked at and assessed was done as the framework of the objectification theory proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). They applied this theory to women and girls who were subjected to sexual objectification by placing them in a "sociocultural context" to shed light on their "lived experiences and mental health risks" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The body was singled out as a physical entity subjected to male desire. This theory aimed to address the smaller elements of sexual objectification that come together to pose a psychological threat to girls and women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Fredrickson and Roberts illuminated two paths that women mentally affected by the male gaze could take – the first is a direct consequence of the male gaze, and the second is the indirect internalization of the male gaze, which leads to self-objectification (1997). This means women begin to internalise this gaze by the spectator and see themselves as objects to be looked at and validated by the outside world. This may give rise to mental health problems in girls and women, such as being anxious not only about their physical appearance but also about their physical safety, which may further lead to eating disorders, depression and so on (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Systematically, the concept of "male gaze" has found itself in the transgender discourse, especially in the case of transwomen, who are subjected to "the gaze" – an occurrence similar to that of the experiences of women. Borrowing from Mulvey, Lefebvre (2020), in his thesis focusing on the phenomenon of the "male gaze" subjected by transwomen, explored the role of power at play in perpetuating such an imbalance across genders, with men as the perpetrator on one side and the rest as their recipient on the other. Emphasizing the existence of hegemony between the men who perpetuate the same on the more "sensitive" men (Holland et al., 2016), Lefebvre pointed out that "the male gaze can be seen as coming from a place of privilege (those who adhere to societal norms) and directed towards those with less privilege (men who don't adhere to traditional masculine norms)" (2020), and thus can be biased. The male gaze can be experienced across various forms: a) verbally harassing or criticizing the way someone looks, (b) All genders fostering a general feeling, and (c) self-policing or criticizing other women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Applying Mulvey's concept of the male gaze in the case of transgenders where men perform the active role of looking at the passive transwomen, this paper will explore such occurrences through an investigation of the life narratives of transgenders through their autobiographies. The theoretical framework of this study is an integration of Mulvey's male gaze theory, Fredrickson and Roberts' objectification theory, and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. This will facilitate a deeper understanding of the implications of the male gaze on Hijra individuals who stand to perceive the transwoman's body as an object from which they derive pleasure. The experience of being subjected to the gaze places the Hijra individuals in a position of vulnerability. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the effect it may leave on them, physically as well as mentally, as they are exposed to men who treat them as merely objects to be looked at, teased or cat-called.

The research dwells on the theories of the male gaze and objectification and how they are so intertwined with each other. The recipients of this gaze are not limited to just women and girls but also transwomen. Although they identify as women and face challenges that are analogous to those of cisgender women, they are often excluded from the narratives and research that address these challenges. In India, hijras also face the additional challenge of upholding their gender identity in a heteronormative society that does not differentiate an individual's gender from their biological sex. Being from a community that is widely marginalized and discriminated against, they are often subjected to verbal and physical

abuse. This abuse, most times, is perpetuated in the form of sexual abuse where men perceive them as a sexual body out of which they can draw pleasure, putting the hijras in a position of vulnerability.

Personal narratives of hijras, well documented in their autobiographies, are a testimony to such experiences. To study these issues at their core, the study will include a critical discourse analysis of the language that has been employed in such narratives. Norman Fairclough introduced his three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis in his book titled *Language and Power* (1989). Through this theory, Fairclough established the use of language as a social practice. In his model, Fairclough establishes three levels or stages of analysis: description, interpretation and explanation. In the first level, the analysis takes place at the textual level. Here, we look directly at language used in the production of discourse and analyze it to understand its varying features and characteristics, such as vocabulary, grammar and structure that have been employed to give meaning to the text. Accordingly, in this stage, this study will first identify those aspects of the language of the texts that are an indication of being gazed at and objectified. Additionally, the language of the texts will be examined to investigate the implications of this experience on the Hijras.

The second stage of the analysis is interpretation, which actively involves the role of the discourse producer and the discourse consumer. This stage of analysis strives to interpret the text about its context from the perspective of the producer with the help of “cues” given intermingled with the consumer’s background knowledge, which Fairclough termed as “members’ resource” (MR).

The third and final stage of analysis in Fairclough’s three-dimensional model is explanation, which deals with the social conditions in which the discourse is produced. In this stage, discourse is reproduced as an outcome of the processes of description and interpretation regarding its social context. In this stage, this study will inquire into the mechanisms of the male gaze within its social context to understand the underlying dynamics that contribute to its existence.

Autobiographies are a crucial resource in extending first-hand narratives of the personal experiences of hijras that are, at times, overlooked or misrepresented in mainstream narratives. It offers them a space to undo the stereotypes and prejudices brought about by decades of misunderstandings and underrepresentation and provides insights into their accounts of their struggles and challenges.

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research is qualitative. It employs narrative and descriptive approaches as its research methods. This study includes the personal narratives or autobiographies of three hijra authors titled *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2014) by Laxmi, and *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) by Revathi as its secondary sources. The data from each autobiography has been collected and analyzed separately and then coalesced in a manner that it is framed as a single narrative. This research aims to analyze the occurrence of the male gaze experienced by hijra individuals and the impact it has had on them. Therefore, the language of the text serves as a critical tool for its analysis.

In terms of its subject area, the scope of this study is confined to the implications of the male gaze on hijra individuals in particular and does not deal with the topic of transgender individuals in general. The gaze is not limited to simply being looked at but also being viewed as an object of sexual pleasure, often leading to them being subjected to sexual abuse. The pronouns “she/her” are used to address each hijra individual as they are consistently used in the autobiographies. The study is also limited to covering the expression of the social and psychological problems of hijras resulting from experiencing the male gaze and objectification through the analysis of language used in the selected autobiographies. It does not include an in-depth study of such psychological problems as a medical disorder, as in the field of psychology and medical science.

Descriptive research is a type of research method where a situation or a phenomenon is described as it is, without the need to explain why or how a certain thing occurred. Therefore, in this study, this method will be used to describe several particulars of events or situations that have taken place in the autobiographies.

In narrative research, the personal narratives of individuals, in either written or spoken form, or both, are used as data that is to be analyzed. Applying this method, the personal narratives of Laxmi and Revathi are analyzed in this study. The analysis follows the model of Fairclough’s framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA). In this regard, it may be acknowledged that language is a major component of society, which plays a big part in providing an idea or meaning (be it positive or negative) to a label or identity or how perceived ideas, meanings or expressions lead to the construction of an identity. In the same manner, this aspect of language is used to analyze the autobiographies and identify those

components which help us to understand how being gazed at and becoming the subject of constant objectification by male individuals in society influences or affects the minds of Hijra individuals.

5. ANALYSIS

In Laxmi's autobiography titled *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, she recounts distressing episodes of her being sexually and emotionally exploited by young boys, which began at the young age of seven. The confusion and pain of such a dreadful experience are clearly expressed in the autobiography – "...an older boy, a sort of distant cousin, lured me into a dark room and...I was too young to understand he was molesting me ...the pain was so excruciating I almost passed out. I have a hazy memory of all of this" (Laxmi, 2015).

Laxmi was only a ten-year-old boy when this happened and fell victim to the ill doings of an older male cousin who sexually exploited him, leaving him to suffer physically and psychologically. Here, Laxmi describes being in so much pain due to the actions of the older cousin that it drove him to the brink of losing consciousness. Her effeminate ways, which already made her stand out from other young boys of her age group and made her a subject of ridicule and bullying, encouraged the older boy who believed it was not wrong to indulge in such activities with her. The idea of masculinity that is presented in society which includes characteristics of being strong and bold, in addition to some norms of behavior, body-language and clothing assigned to the male gender – something the older boy conformed to, and Laxmi did not – must have created an image of her in the boy's mind as being abnormal, feminine and thus, weaker.

Laxmi, who experienced this as a biological male with traits that diverged from the gender norms laid down for the male gender (before she transitioned to a transgender), continuously found herself on the receiving end of such brutality. Sexual abuse perpetrated on her by young boys became a regular occurrence. She was constantly pursued merely for pleasure, to which she usually complied out of fear. At times, if she refused, she was met with physical assault apart from the usual molestation that she faced. The image of Laxmi as an object of sexual desire had been so strongly engraved in the minds of these young boys to the extent that it crossed the lines of family relationships and caused the loss of the perpetrator's sense of his sexual orientation. To them, Laxmi fell under the category of the weaker sex just because he did not comply with the standard norms of masculinity.

This was in sharp contrast to how men perceived her brother, Shashi, whom she described as "masculine" – a trait she considered was a "weapon that would save him from harm" (Laxmi, 2015). These words reflect the fact that Laxmi was self-aware of being gender-deviant. She understood that she was preyed on due to her effeminacy. She compares masculinity to a weapon – a metaphor for power or something that can keep him safe and save him from harm. She also acknowledges her lack of this "weapon" (2015), which places her in a position of vulnerability. Conversely, her younger brother Shashi was immune to the hostilities that she faced because he had the qualities of what defined masculinity, which served as his shield. There is so much weight put on the qualities of what makes a man in society that anything or anyone that does not rise to its standards is naturally devalued. In Laxmi's case, the very core of her identity was simply dismissed by people as being unnatural and abnormal to the extent that they went on to violate her body.

As a teenage boy, Laxmi also had a different kind of relationship that she shared with other boys of her age group, which she describes as romantic relationships. She reveals that she shared a connection with these and therefore consented to consummate their relationship. She also admits that she enjoyed the attention she received from them (Laxmi, 2015), and any inconsistency would make him upset. In an unfortunate series of events, she soon comes to the realization that these boys had emotionally and sexually exploited him. To them, Laxmi was merely a body – an object – from which they could draw their pleasure (Laxmi, 2015).

The romantic relationships and other incidents she experienced that involved men soon made her aware of the fact that he was gazed upon by other men. She became a victim of the male gaze, was objectified and tossed around. In the autobiography, she remarks, "My body was a playhouse and a plaything, and any man could do anything with it. Twice, I was almost raped..." (Laxmi, 2015).

Here, Laxmi compares herself to a "playhouse" or a "plaything", which are common nouns – objects one can play with – ripping herself off of individuality and autonomy. The phrase "any man can do anything with it" adds more meaning to the two nouns, suggesting her vulnerability. Also, she addresses herself as "it" – a pronoun used to refer to things – dismissing herself as a person. It indicates that Laxmi was losing a sense of self. Being gazed at and treated as an object of pleasure ever since the young age of 10 had taken a toll on her psychology. Due to the recurring nature of such events, Laxmi began developing a sense of disgust and fear of men. She expresses how the patriarchal character of society

“nauseated” her to the point that any physical contact with a man terrifies her and causes her to scream reflexively (2015). Laxmi links such actions of men to patriarchy, where men assert their power over the rest. Although being a man himself at the time of such events, he did not identify as one.

Revathi, too, began experiencing such advances from men at a very young age. Her first encounter was with a young college student who lived in his neighbourhood and sometimes helped her with her academic lessons. Revathi narrates it as, “He would pinch my cheeks, kiss me and hug me. I liked it when he did these things” (2010). Because Revathi was just a ten-year-old boy during this time, it would seem to the reader that the young man’s actions are just innocent gestures of affection. However, Revathi adds that the young man addressed her as a “female thing”, which sets the tone of such gestures as an act of drawing pleasure from a little girl. Addressing her in such a manner removes her from the gender identity of a man that Revathi was assigned due to her biological sex. Revathi admits to having felt “painfully shy” upon hearing the remark. This is justified by the fact that being called a “female thing” was the closest thing that Revathi could relate to at that time, as a child experiencing gender dysphoria. Right from birth, a child is expected to follow gender norms associated with their biological sex. At times, some children fail to identify with these norms and suffer from gender dysphoria due to the confusion that arises from this experience. Due to a lack of proper awareness or information, in addition to the prejudices and stigma that exist in society, they tend to internalize or accept any information that comes close to how they are feeling.

Revathi also mentions another horrific incident where some rowdies had caught hold of one of her transgender friends and forcefully made her engage in sexual activity with them: “I asked her what had happened, and she said that they had done danda on her” (2010). This implies that a couple of male rowdies had molested her friend. The rowdies picking on her transgender friends was a regular event. Sadly, her friends would also give in since they thought they had no choice. They tell Revathi, “If you are a girl-boy, you have no choice. Don’t you know this?” (2010). Asking Revathi if she did not know this suggests that they considered that this was how things were supposed to be. The men would regularly come and derive pleasure from them in an inhumane manner, not bothered by their impact on their victims. And her friends would accept this treatment silently since they also believed their existence was beyond the understanding of the civil society and was, therefore, wrong and abnormal. This explains how vulnerable they feel in a society that has failed to make them feel secure for simply expressing their gender identity. She expresses her horror and points out how it caused pain and exhaustion to her transgender friend. She writes, “She looked exhausted. Sweat ran down her face and she could barely walk...I was horrified and wondered if such things were indeed possible. She looked so wan and tired and was in obvious pain” (2010). The pain was not only physical, but it also wounded the minds of these transgenders who, with each experience of molestation, would accept these experiences as being natural, thus leaving them “no choice” (2010).

She also mentions how she, along with other hijra companions, would often be stared at or teased by men who made sexual remarks. At times, men would even go to the point of touching them on their waists and shoulders. She states, “We got stared a lot...Some men made bold to touch us, on our waists or our shoulders” (2010).

Revathi was not spared, even though she was working with her brothers. Now learning about her rendezvous in Delhi as a hijra, the workers would make advances at her when her brothers weren’t around and touch her inappropriately, subjecting her to sexual harassment. “Sometimes, when no one was looking, they would pinch my chest, run their hands...I was afraid to complain to my brothers. Everyday proved to be an ordeal...” (p.58).

Revathi was molested by men closely working with her own family. She reveals that she was terrified of reporting this matter to her brothers because doing so would mean inviting more trouble for herself. The workers, perhaps knowing this, took the opportunity to make the best out of this situation. They did not see her as a fellow-worker or even a dignified human being. To them, she was just an object of curiosity – something to be looked at, touched or felt, irrespective of her wishes.

Revathi expresses how each day she continued to suffer in the hands of these men, with her only solution being to go back to her people – the hijras – where she felt safer than with her blood. Being pushed to the margins, often seen begging or indulging in sex work, the hijra community has been ripped off of dignity and self-respect in society. Because they do not hold a reputable position, they are ill-treated by the people. The stigma and superstitions attached to their existence only add to their long list of adversities.

Revathi also shares another horrifying incident where she describes how a man dared to invade her personal space and touch her inappropriately:

I found the driver on the cot eyeing me while pretending to sleep...I woke up, feeling something touch me. The driver on the cot had opened the glass door and his hand was sliding up my leg. I did not know what to do. He looked rough, big, with a large moustache. I was scared if I were to ask him to remove his hand, he would get me into trouble. Afraid that if I spoke my voice would give away as a hijra, I slowly pushed his hand away from my leg. (Revathi, 2010)

Revathi felt the driver's hands touching her but she expressed feeling helpless. Her description of the driver being "rough" and "big" reflects her fear of this man, who could potentially harm her. Women have been victims of such incidents and keep having these experiences daily. The hijras, who adorn themselves in women's clothing and display women-like behaviour, fall prey to the same kind of harassment at the hands of men. The concept of patriarchy has been so strongly imbibed in the minds of some men that they mistake it as having uncontested power over women and, therefore, hijras.

However, the bigger problem in Revathi's incident is her reluctance to raise her voice even if she received support from a fellow traveller. Here, Revathi's fear of being found out as a hijra, as she had a masculine voice, was bigger than her need to defend herself, which itself is a matter of concern. This reflects how society has failed to provide a sense of security to the hijras who continue to feel threatened based on their gender identity.

Revathi also describes they'd be treated as mere objects while being picked up for dance shows: "...they'd come, look at us and choose whoever they wanted to come and dance that year...It is like shopping at the vegetable market. You pinch, squeeze and satisfy yourself of the vegetable's quality before you buy. We were inspected likewise. One's self-respect had to be hawked thus to feed one's stomach" (2010).

Revathi compares their plight to that of vegetables sold in the market, where they go through a quality check – the good ones will be kept while the ones that do not meet the standards will be discarded. She expresses how they are dehumanised just to earn their daily bread at the cost of their dignity. She had to go through such an ordeal just because she had no other source of income. Due to a lack of job opportunities, hijras often resort to begging and sex work to make a living. The stigma and transphobia surrounding them make it very difficult for them to find a place in the professional space. At times, when they do manage to get jobs, they face gender-based discrimination, harassment and abuse, which makes often forces them to quit their jobs.

6. DISCUSSION

The autobiographies titled *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxmi and *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by Revathi reveal the adversities faced by the hijra community, who are treated as outcasts in society. They fall prey to the constructs of a heteronormative and patriarchal social system where they are gazed upon by men as objects of curiosity and pleasure. This male gaze reveals the mechanisms of a complex layer of gender-based prejudices accompanied by the power dynamics of the social system that seeks to control non-normative gender behaviour and expressions.

In their autobiographies, Laxmi and Revathi share their encounters with men. While Laxmi's experience entails the part before becoming a hijra – as a little boy suffering from gender dysphoria – Revathi's experience covers the time she was a little boy to a grown-up full-fledged hijra. Laxmi avoids talking about her experience with men as a hijra in detail. However, she does mention how men had forced themselves upon her, leaving her scarred for life. One common occurrence in their narratives is the approach of men towards them. They have been objectified for their bodies – be it Laxmi as a bar dancer or Revathi participating in functions. Though the experiences remain scarred in their memories, they did not let it define them.

The narratives of these autobiographies signify how Laxmi and Revathi resist and challenge such forms of oppression. They find their voice in their narration and take back their dignity and right to self-expression and representation, thus reclaiming their agency. The autobiographies serve as the pillar of resistance, confronting the dominant ideals of a heteronormative system.

In a broader social context, this paper seeks to highlight the intersectionality of gender, sexuality and marginalization. It calls for a more empathetic perception of hijras where they move beyond the subject of the male gaze and acknowledge the complexity and agency of their existence.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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