

The In-Between Life: Analysing Themes of Non-Belonging in a Revathi's Truth About Me

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Abstract:

A Revathi's autobiography *Truth about me: A Hijra life story* (2010) is a crucial text that narrates the complexities of hijra life, and highlights her contention with rigid heteronormative society. Her narrative is not merely an account of her defiance but also her strive for belongingness. This article is going to analyse the theme of non-belongingness in her text through the lens of Cultural marginalisation and Gender Identity struggle. Cultural marginalisation refers to the process by which certain groups or individuals are excluded from the mainstream cultural narrative due to power imbalances, pushed to the social periphery and denied access to resources, opportunities, or representation. This forced marginalisation leads to their gender identity struggle, where they will not be able to fit themselves in the society. Judith Butler's notion of Performativity and Foucault's idea of subjectivity, will be employed to understand the gender identity of Revathi. While focusing on how Revathi exhibits her emancipation through her writing, reflecting her capacity to withstand and transcend the adversities of oppression, this particular study will contribute to filling the lacuna in the nature of cultural and gender marginalisation and its effect on an individual's sense of belongingness.

Keywords: Cultural Marginalisation, Exclusion, Gender, Identity, Non-belonging, Transgender

INTRODUCTION

A. Revathi is a Bengaluru based writer, an activist working for the rights of sexual minorities, and a trans woman belonging to the Hijra community. She was born as Doraisamy in the district of Namakkal in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Her autobiography, *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* not only provides a personal account of the diversified challenges she faced throughout her life, rather the condition of the hijra community in post-colonial India. Hijra community is an ancient Indian transgender socio-cultural group, deeply rooted in spirituality, ritualistic performances and kinship system. Revathi's transition from a boy Doraisamy to a hijra Revathi is not limited to her bodily transformation, rather it was social, cultural and psychological too. It was her transformation from a meek feminine male to an empowered trans woman. It is the journey of a human being to reclaim one's identity despite every odd. Across various domains of existence, the common thread is an experience of non-belongingness that permeates throughout her story. This article explores how Revathi's sense of non-belonging was brought out through various experiences within culture, society, as well as on a personal level through the lens of gender identity struggles.

In his seminal text *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault introduces the concept of panopticon, to explain how people internalize norms through surveillance. He also talked about subjectivity (one sense of self is formed through this

surveillance) and asserts, in modern societies, power does not primarily operate through armed force but through subtle forms of control, making individuals complicit in their own subjugation. Gender norms function similarly. Individuals regulate their own behavior due to the constant pressure of societal norms, producing a disciplined gendered self. Integrating Judith Butler's concepts of performativity [Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990)] into the same, where she suggests, individuals "do" gender rather than "be" gender and this repeated enactment of gendered behaviors creates the illusion of a stable identity; this discussion primarily suggests that disciplinary power creates subjects, in particular one does not exist as a "man" or "woman" before engaging in gendered performances. Taking this argument further, one can say, transgender identity is a subjugation of normative performances. The very existence of trans and non-binary identities disrupts the gender binary that disciplinary power seeks to enforce and then this leads to their non-belongingness. Their sense of self restricts them to behave in expected manner, in contrast the disciplinary power forces them to obey the dominant norms.

In Gender Trouble, Butler revisits Beauvoir and asserts, "there is nothing in her [Beauvoir's] account that guarantees that the one who becomes a woman is necessarily female" (Butler, 1990, p.12). This discussion of gender identity from Foucault to Butler suggests, Gender is a performance and this performance becomes norm through disciplinary forces, which is subverted by trans individuals. Revathi's narrative is an account of this subversion.

Revathi's narrative begins in a small village of Tamil Nadu, where she was born as Doraisamy, the last born of five children and fourth son of a rural family. Despite being a male by birth, she started growing up as an introvert with effeminate traits such as her preferences to dress like a girl and engage in household duties that apparently belong to her mother. Initially it was unnoticed but as she grew up, it became difficult for others to ignore such traits and from there the ostracization began.

In this text, Revathi talks about an incident of her childhood where she played the role of a woman in a festival. She writes "To the world, it appeared that I was dressing up and playing a woman, but inside, I felt I was a woman" (12). It is a widely accepted notion that gender identity is a discursive set of practices and it has nothing to do with biological sex, but society has fixed performance parameters for man and woman. The deviation from those culturally accepted parameters leads to questioning of one's identity and as a result her childhood years were filled with discomfort as she tried to reconcile her body's incongruity with her innermost desires. A well-known American trans woman and activist, Jacob Tobia recounts in her memoir *Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story* (2019), the numerous instances of being excluded from both male and female social groups, highlighting how binary social structures leave no space for those who exist in between or outside them. In her narrative also she talks about how social spaces, from school bathrooms to family gatherings, become sites of potential conflict and exclusion for trans individuals, reinforcing a feeling of not belonging anywhere.

Revathi writes while remembering her relation with family that their lack of acceptance was a constant reminder of her exclusion. Transphobia often begins at home through family rejection, discrimination, and non-acceptance. This transphobic rejection often manifests as imposing rigid gender norms, emotional neglect, physical and verbal abuse. The child who feels deeply unwanted or unaccepted despite having so many people around him will show signs of trauma in his later life. Since her childhood Revathi is treated as deviant or unnatural because of her unexpected gender performance, as the dominant notion of compulsory heterosexuality is not allowing her family to accept a child who is not behaving in the manner society approves. The young boy Doraisamy was vulnerable to the male

members of his family because of his feminine traits, and this continuous ignorance forced him to form alliances with people like him and that's how he became Revathi a Hijra.

Revathi asserts, "A woman trapped in the body of a man was how I thought of myself. I wondered why God has chosen to inflict this peculiar torture on me and why he could not have created me wholly male or wholly female. (...), and all the time I was obsessed, confused and anxious." (15).

The phrase "a woman trapped in the body of a man" expresses her gender dysphoria, the psychological distress caused by a disconnect between assigned sex and gender identity. This can be understood through Butler's theory of gender performativity (*Gender Trouble*, 1990), which states that gender is not an innate essence but a social construct reinforced through repeated behaviors. In one of her other essays, *Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics* published in 2009 in the *AIBR Journal of Iberoamerican Anthropology*, Butler expands this view on performance and highlights that when one's gender identity does not conform to cultural norms, it leads to precarity; a state of vulnerability and exclusion. She suggests human vulnerability is universal as all human beings are interdependent on each other, but certain populations, like gender non-binary, who are prone to exclusion and are in risk of not being qualified as a subject of recognition and are victims of politically induced precarity. She argues, "performativity is an account of agency and precarity seems to focus on conditions that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one's control" (Butler, 2009, p. 1).

Revathi's words, "why could he not have created me wholly male or wholly female", reflect the internalized sense of precarity or being outside on the binary, reinforcing the feeling of non-belonging. The feeling of belongingness is a key aspect of one's identity. Susan Stryker mentions in her 2nd edition of *Transgender History*, "Lives that do not conform to this dominant pattern are generally treated as lives that are not worth living and that have little or no value" (17). This pattern of thoughts led to the systematic exclusion of trans people in society. This social devaluation produces a sense of non-belonging, as their identity is not acknowledged within the framework of livable lives. This feeling of non-belonging is not simply a subjective feeling but a socially produced condition that implies systematic mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality and cultural marginalization.

Transgender life writing exposes these challenges which trans people are resisting in their day-to-day life. In the contemporary world self-narration becomes a process of discovery, emancipation, and reclamation of one's own identity. It is not only a tool to become aware of the societal values and beliefs which hold one back, rather an approach to conquer collective trauma and their liberation from systematic oppression. It becomes a journey of discovering inner strength. As Caruth suggests in her text *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, writing one's own life is a form of resilience which marginalized people choose to overcome feelings of non-belongingness. Non-belongingness is defined as a persistent state of emotional, social, and spatial displacement wherein an individual is excluded from the domains of family, community, nation, and self.

Revathi asserts her identity when she writes, "As a hijra, I get pushed to the fringes of the society (...). I do not seek sympathy from society or the government. I seek to show we hijras do have the right to live in this society." (5-6)

Indian transgender autobiography is a recent literary revolution which explores various sites of oppression of non-binary individuals within society. Through her narrative she negotiates collective trauma and paves a way for the Hijra community. The role of language is crucial when one talks of identity. Butler also asserts, performatives include words or actions that communicate an effect or create an emotional response, or are used to affect someone positively or negatively.

Revathi talks about the pronouns people use for her when she was in school, ‘Girl-boy!’ ‘Ali! Number 9!’ and asserts, “My heart would sink at these words, but I also felt faintly gratified and even happy that these boys actually conceded that I was somehow a woman” (6). As per Revathi’s concern, she does not totally disagree with the pronouns used for her, she admits that at least they consider her a woman. This acceptance serves as markers of both exclusion and reluctant recognition, reflecting how social structures enforce rigid gender binaries at the same time exposing their instability. Her simultaneous pain (“my heart would sink”) and gratification (“I also felt faintly gratified and even happy”) demonstrate the paradox of being seen yet misrecognized which infused the feeling of othering in her.

That question of self-worth prevalent throughout her life. In this text one can see, Revathi constantly strives for her parental validation. External validation plays a major role in identity formation. When her family and society don’t consider her normal; she becomes abnormal for the rest of her life. The instances where Revathi doubts her identity becomes a major signifier of non-belongingness in her autobiography.

She writes “But more than anything, I was eager to become a woman and that was all that mattered to me. Back then I thought that in order to turn feminine, all I needed to do was get rid of this male object and I would become free to be a woman, like other women” (66).

This negotiation of identity is the centre of her existence. Revathi’s belief that removing the “male object” (her assigned biological features) would make her a complete woman, corresponds with the way society enforces the idea that gender is tied to physical organs. Her eagerness to remove “male object” reflects the deep distress of gender dysphoria. Revathi understood herself as a woman since her childhood, even then she went through the process of “Nirvana” to fit into the societal idea of a woman. Her desire to “become free to be a woman, like other women” forced her to go through castration. The trauma of non-belonging comes from this imposed binary, where trans individuals feel pressure to prove their womanhood through medical transition. Her belief that bodily alteration will grant freedom highlights cultural pressure to conform to rigid gender norms to be accepted.

Although even after transition she will not be able to become “fully a woman” instead a castrated woman who does not fit in the societal binary. She wanted to be known as Revathi: A Woman, but society named her trans woman. She is no longer a woman or a man. Now when she has to use the women’s restroom at the train station, people reprimanded her for being a hijra and told her to work and behave like a man. Revathi lost herself between being a man and a woman. This feeling of living on a slash becomes one of the reasons behind her internal sense of non-belongingness. The shifting of Revathi to the hijra community is the repercussion of her exclusion at her place where she was born. By seeking out communities of people like her and creating inclusive spaces with them, Revathi encounters her alienation.

While highlighting the compulsion of trans life to join communities of people like them, she writes, “Some came out of choice, others came lacking any choice” (132). This assertion captures the complex reality of transgender displacement, and the systemic marginalization that forces individuals into certain spaces, whether or not they willingly choose them. This reflects how some transgender individuals actively seek a community where they can live authentically, while others are pushed into alternative spaces due to familial rejection, social exclusion, and economic marginalization.

This indicates how non-belonging is not simply a personal feeling but a structurally imposed reality, reinforcing the exclusion and forced displacement. Revathi notes that she sought solace in communities that embraced diversity, where she could be seen and heard

for who she actually is. The constant struggle to fit in took a toll on Revathi's sense of self, leaving a question of transgender's place in this world of binaries.

Butler explains this by stating, "I think we won't be able to understand the operations of trans-phobia, homophobia, if we don't understand how certain kinds of links are forged between gender and sexuality in the minds of those who want masculinity to be absolutely separate from femininity and heterosexuality to be absolutely separate from homosexuality."

Conclusion

Revathi's autobiography offers significant insights into the broader discourse of gender identity struggle and cultural marginalisation. Her narrative reveals, being transgender is not just a personal struggle, rather a systemic social exclusion rooted in structural oppression. The recurring themes of misrecognition, forced displacement, alienation and precarious belonging illustrate how transgender individuals are pushed to the periphery of society in search of belongingness. The struggle for belonging, therefore, is not just about gender identity but about dismantling the oppressive structures that render certain lives unlivable. Through the lens of Foucault's subjectivity and Butler's performativity, Revathi's narrative depicts the broader mechanisms of how disciplinary power and performativity enforce rigid gender binaries and how being a transgender, she subverts these notions. Her narrative highlights how exclusion begins at home and extends into broader social structures, leading to a life of non-belongingness. Her narrative depicts the interlink of her non-belonging to the dominant notion of heteronormativity. The lack of acceptance from both mainstream and traditional communities underscores the depth of her non-belongingness. This not only affects her sense of identity but also her place within the socio-cultural framework. Despite the challenges of non-belongingness, Revathi's resilience emerges as a central theme of the text. Her ability to navigate and resist systemic oppression while advocating for her rights and the rights of others within the hijra community reflects her position as an empowered woman. This resilience is a testament to her strength and unyielding quest for self-affirmation and justice.

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