

TRANSIER THAN THOU: MARGINALIZATION WITHIN THE MARGINALIZED

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Abstract

Whenever one comes across terms like transgender, queer, lesbian, gay etc, the immediate thing that strikes is how these people are being discriminated, exploited and held in a position of lowliness, how they are pushed to the fringes of society and above all the inequalities they are destined and doomed to witness. But more pertinent in a contemporary scenario, where various measures are being taken up the public as well as the government to rip off the heteronormative gender colonization, is the inequalities prevailing within them; a sort of hierarchy that prevails within the transgender community.

Hierarchies within the social setup are peculiar to Indian society, having the caste system as a standing testimony. The transgender community is no exception for this. The internal structure of the transgender community reflects how rifely the binaries of superior – inferior, black – white, fair – unfair kick around. In her autobiography, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, A. Revathy unveils the binaries and inequalities exist among them. The hijras attributes great vitalness to the process of ‘nirvana’ or castration; people who have undergone the castration receive more power and attention than those who have not done such sex reassignment surgeries. Another instance that reveals the double standards within these communities is the importance they have given to the conventional notion of ‘fairness’ and ‘beauty’; a hijra who is more beautiful, more feminine, who is “just like a woman” is treated with more affection and dignity while the others who are dark skinned and so “feminine” are viewed with contempt. The power structure exists within the transgender communities shows the inequalities prevailing within them.

Keywords: LGBTQI — transgender — heteronormative — marginalization — hierarchy

“One is not born, but becomes a man [or a woman]. No biological, psychological and economic fate determines the figure that the human female [and male] present in the society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this [notion of femininity and masculinity]” (Beauvoir 267).

Our society, from time immemorial, is built around the binary opposition of men and women and also on the importance attributed to the notion of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ for

categorization is a key feature of human kind. People everywhere often categorize themselves and others; it has become one of the most fundamental and basic aspects of human existence and meaning making as time progresses. But, unfortunately, the ways in which these categorization and separation are made are never neutral, having the man – woman categorization as a standing testimony.

But what disrupted these conventional notions and concepts is the appearance and popularization of phrases like Lesbian, Gay, Bisexuals, Transgender, Queer, Intersex etc - the introduction of the term LGBTQI. The term LGBTQI itself gave a great blow to the conventional and stereotypical gender identities. Even though LGBTQI, as an umbrella term, incorporates and encompasses the shared traumatic saga of these people, the pains, agonies and sufferings that they confront in their day to day life is not similar. The psychological, physical, mental, social and cultural torment and affliction of a lesbian is much different from that of a transgender or a bisexual. So, what is more pertinent is to look at and ponder over their lives and sufferings individually rather than viewing them collectively.

The very term “transgender” designates a wide variety of gender experiences, subjectivities, prejudices, presentation and representations that fall across and trespasses the conventional and stable categories of “man” and “woman”. Transgender as an umbrella term designates people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from that usually associated with their birth sex. Transgenderism is “... the breaking of gender roles and gender identities and going across the boundaries of gender to another gender” (Green 2006). Trans identities were one of the most written and debated subjects of the late twentieth century. The widespread discussions and heated debates on the transgender issues have created and have opened up a wide variety of scopes in the form of new academic disciplines, new forms of entertainment, new challenges to law and government and above all, it has provided opportunities to broaden the horizons and attitudes of a whole lot of people.

When one comes across terms like transgender, queer, lesbian, gay etc, the immediate thing that strikes is how they are being discriminated, exploited and held in a position of lowliness, how they are pushed to the fringes of society and above all the inequalities they are destined and doomed to witness. They were marginalized, sidelined and disregarded in every realms of their life – physically, socially, mentally, psychologically and even linguistically. Each and every transgender had gone through heart wrenching familial as well as societal suppression and oppression from various agencies and institutions like religion, cultural taboos, conventional social norms etc. Their lives are a constant struggle and quest for self –actualization. Yet, it is also important to notice that attempts are made to bring the transgender to the mainstream; laws were passed to acknowledge their identities so that it would be possible for them to lead a “normal” life. These attempts, to a large extent,

had urged and helped the public to view these transgender as one among them. So, more pertinent in this contemporary scenario, where various measures are being taken up by the public as well as by the government to rip off the heteronormative gender colonization is the inequalities prevailing within them; a sort of hierarchy that prevails within the transgender community – marginalization within the marginalized.

Hierarchies within the social setup are peculiar to Indian society, having the caste system as a standing testimony. The transgender community is no exception for this. The internal structure of the transgender community reflects how rifle the binaries of superior – inferior, black – white, fair – unfair kick around. In addition to the multiple perils and multiple discriminations they are forced to face due to the unconventional identification and lack of identification with the rest of the society, they are victims of various kinds of suppression and prejudices within them. What is more painful is that they find these inequalities within their structure as more oppressive and offensive than outside their structure.

In her autobiography, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*, A. Revathy unveils the multiple dangers, inequalities and binaries exist among the transgender community. This provocative, spellbinding and awe – inspiring book, which is hailed as the first book ever to have been written by an Indian hijra, divulges even the most ‘private’ aspects of life of a hijra. Caste, colour, financial background etc play a very significant role within the transgender community. What is interesting here is that, this discrimination and denial of rights based on one’s colour, caste, financial backgrounds is nothing new in the Indian context. From time immemorial, people are denied and deprived of basic human rights in the name of sex, sexuality, caste, colour and religion.

One of the major intra – cultural discriminatory practices that create double marginalization in the transgender community is the vitalness they attribute to the process of castration or sex reassignment surgery. Castration or ‘nirvana’ as they respectfully call it plays a very pertinent role in the lives of the transgender, even if the access to safe sex reassignment surgery (SRS) seems to be a highly neglected issue and even if they had to resort to and undergo through a crude, extremely risky and painful process. It’s the search for a “perfect” body that led them to transform into womanhood through the process of nirvana. The pain and suffering they had to undergo during this process is explicit in many of their writings. For instance, in her autobiography *I am Vidya: A Transgender’s Journey Living Smile Vidya*, a transgender in Chennai talks about this whole process of ‘nirvana’ with utmost clarity and transparency; “imagine a scalpel digging deep into your innards as if to remove them”. That is how she felt when she underwent castration at a clinic in Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh, for “just Rs.6000”. It was performed in “barely 20 minutes” in an operation theatre frighteningly reminiscent of a “slaughterhouse”. The interesting fact to notice here is that they submit themselves to this excruciating process of castration willingly and

wholeheartedly. One of the main reasons behind this suffering is that they want to be liberated from the male identity and be a “complete” and “full” woman; trapped in a man’s body. But, the real and hidden motive behind this endurance is the overwhelming urge to get acknowledged within their structure, since people who had put up with the process of castration receive more power and attention than those who had not done any such sex reassignment surgeries. This double marginalization is clearly explicated in Revathi’s book. She says in one occasion; “I learnt that this was very important, that a feminine man offers respect to the sari – clad [who has done their nirvana] and earns their goodwill; this is our [system] and tradition” (21). It is this respect that they received from their fellow community members, which prompted many of the transgender including Revathi and Vidya to go through the piercing pain of castration. They believe that ‘nirvana’ would put them in a higher pedestal and give them a superior feeling.

Despite making prodigious leaps and hikes in the fields of science, technology etc and despite being progressed towards a more modern and advanced civilization, many people, particularly Indians, are so adamant and conventional when there comes the question of beauty and fairness. Being beautiful means being fair and being feminine – this is the notion that we injects and inoculates in the minds of people from a very early age and they are forced to internalize these notions into their psyche. It is this internalization that gives the fairness products an impetus to mushroom and flourish like anything. It’s even shameful to accept that people are being marginalized and sidelined even today because of not being so fair and because of their colour. Unfortunately and dreadfully the transgender community too is not free from these shackles of fairness, beauty and good looks, just like the mainstream hetero sexist society. The prominence they attribute and given to the conventional notion of “fairness” and “beauty” reveals the double standards and multiple precariousness within their structure; a hijra who is more beautiful, more feminine, who is “just like a woman” is treated with more affection and dignity while the others who are dark skinned and “not so feminine” are viewed with contempt.

Revathy, in her autobiography makes this distinction and marginalization explicitly clear. She illustrates numerous experiences, where she always got a privilege and upper hand over the other hijras since she was “fair, beautiful and more feminine”. She was treated with love, affection and compassion by the elder transgender and she was superior to other hijras who were dark and not so beautiful. She narrates one such experience:

The guru took fancy to me and agreed to make me her chela. This made the others very jealous. My new guru scolded and admonished them, ‘why be so blunt and rude to her? ... Talk nicely to her and be kind’. She turned to me and said, ‘see you are fair – skinned, beautiful and pretty like a woman. They are jealous that they won’t get any [privileges]. (102)

Long hair, often considered as a mark of femininity and beauty, was so important for them that one without long hair was considered abominable; “while we felt like women, it was important to look like them too, and long hair and [fair skin] were an important marker of being feminine and [beautiful]” (28). Being fair and “more feminine” were crucial for those hijras who engaged in sex work to earn a livelihood and this often led to a lot of problems and quarrels within them, since they feared that if one is more beautiful than them, it would take the customer away from them. In her autobiography, Revathy depicts such a situation where the other hijras abuse and beat her when they lost their customer because of her:

[The other hijras] began to rain blows on me. They said, ‘she thinks she’s a heroine and that he came especially for her!’ They ended up pulling frenziedly at my hair. Such fights were everyday events. ... A hijra only had to be beautiful or display some weakness – that was enough for people to provoke a fight. (136)

Another instance that divulges the double marginalization as well as the economic dependency of the transgender people is their guru – chela system; the prevalence of a kind of power structure. The power structure exists within the transgender communities shows the inequalities prevailing within them. This power system is so strong and sturdy that it’s very difficult and almost impossible for one to get out of it, for amongst hijras a guru is everything to a chela – she guides her at work, wants her ‘chelas’ or disciples to stay with her, proscribe them from getting married and having a husband and in a way manages every aspects of their life. What is more important to heed here is how these gurus made their chelas economically dependent on them. The chelas had to give all their hard earned money – be it through engaging in sex work or by begging in shops. The gurus would then give a small amount of money from it to the chela for their needs. This clearly indicates how inequalities prevail within them and how the politics of power plays a vital role within their community.

The prevalence of all these inequalities and differentiation among the Trans people reveals how the power structure and power game play a major role within the transgender community. One may be reminded of the multiple marginalization and perils that the Black American women and the Dalit women are subjected to when we talk about the multiple layers of discriminations, separations and intra cultural marginalization within the transgender community. But obviously, the situations, sufferings and torments of transgender are much more varied, intense and profound than that of the Black American and Dalit women. The point here to notice is that even the transgender community is not free from the shackles of discriminations and marginalization which are dominant in the heterosexist society. In the current scenario, magnitude of debates and discussions are being held every day on how the transgender people are being marginalized and sidelined from the

mainstream society and various measures are being taken up by the government and people to alter and improve the situation. But little attention is paid to the discriminations inside their structure; the implications of intra cultural marginalization are being neglected. So, what we need today is awareness on this multiple precariousness and measures to wipe away the inequalities within them along with breaking the gender colonization and heteronormative discourse; then only, an enhanced, brighter and better life would be possible for them.

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