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## THE CONUNDRUM OF GENDER SPECTRUM: A STUDY ON OBJECTIFICATION OF TRANSGENDER BODIES IN LAXMINARAYAN TRIPATHI'S MEMOIR *ME HIJRA, ME LAXMI*

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the identity crisis faced by the third gender for their incongruent body conditions. The appearance of the body plays a major role in expressing one's gender to the world. Gender expressions are divergent from the sexual identity in transgenders. They generally have a disagreeable or negative relationship with their bodies as compared to cisgenders. So, most transgender individuals try to alter their bodies to create a different bodily contour. Though the presence of the hijra community can be traced to ancient Indian society and culture, they are often socially excluded and disrespected. A transgender body is often subjected to doubts, shame, and ridicule. This research paper aims to bring out the predicaments in Laxminarayan Tripathi's autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. Being a hijra she took every effort to have a perfect feminine body so that she would be accepted by society. Little did she realize then that the eyes of the society always find flaws and not the fine point. The study is validated through Dennis Prager's *Happiness Is A Serious Problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual*. 'The Missing Tile Syndrome' is a term coined by Prager, which denotes the human tendency to focus on slight imperfections and anomalies. The society's predisposition, to emphasize the negative qualities, and all the imperfect feminine/masculine features, of the transgender people, instead of what they have achieved as a person, create dissatisfaction in life. Such conditions make transgender individuals question their physical construct, identity and, existence.

**Index Terms:** body incongruity, discrimination, identity, gender, transgender

Transgenders are people who do not fit under the binary gender notions of male and female. When a child is born, the doctors or parents identify the sex of the baby on the basis of the construction of external genitals. But sex and gender are entirely different conceptions. Sex is natural and biological, whereas gender is socially constructed. For centuries transgenders are deliberately marginalized, persecuted and stigmatized for their gender incongruity. In India, the hijra community suffers discrimination, humiliation and violence throughout their life. They are despised by the mainstream society and are forced to undergo physical and psychological abuses in their day to day life. They are excluded from the society and are treated as outsiders though they have every right to live the way they want to.

Many trans people are disowned by their parents, when they get to know about their gender identity. The denial of acceptance and love from parents and family adds much trauma and mental suffocation in the life of trans people. Despite all adversities, transgender community strives hard to prove themselves as competent, talented and valuable. They create opportunities and try to achieve their dreams and destinations. But most of their achievements are not recognized in the main stream arena. The recognitions for their achievements are clouded by their gender incongruity. Dennis Prager in his book *Happiness is a Serious Problem* talks about the human tendency to find one small negative thing amidst all the positive aspects as 'the missing tile syndrome'. This paper focuses on the discriminations and defeats faced by trans people in spite of their accomplishments.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is a trans woman, activist, bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer, actress, and motivational speaker in Mumbai. She is the first transgender person to represent Asia Pacific in the United Nations in the year 2008. She bravely delivered her speech about the hardships faced by trans people and other sexual minority groups in India. As a spokesperson for the trans community she requested everyone to treat her people with respect, dignity and human like. Tripathi has served on the boards of several NGOs that worked for the upliftment of LGBT community. She became the president of the NGO, DAI Welfare society, the first registered organization for transgender people in South Asia. She started her own organization named *Astiva*, to promote the welfare of sexual minorities and support them to be independent. Tripathi is the first trans woman in India to secure a passport which mentioned her sexual identity as 'female, transgender and eunuch'.

*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* is an honest and inspiring narrative of how Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, the eldest son of a traditional Brahmin family transformed to Laxmi, a hijra, creating a benchmark in the history of Indian trans community. In the memoir Laxmi narrates the struggles she underwent during the early days of transition. Since childhood she knew the dominance of femininity in her male body. But she was afraid to disclose her emotions to her parents or anyone in her family. She was brutally molested by an older cousin and his friends. They threatened her not to disclose what they did failing which they would harm her little brother. Devastated Laxmi endured all the pain and agony in silence.

Sickly as I was, I had learnt to endure. I did not tell anyone about the ugly incident. Perhaps the guy's threats scared me. But a few days later, he molested me again, and then again. He was accompanied by his friends and all of them took turns to violate me. The physical and mental torture I went through is indescribable. But I didn't say a word to anyone, either then or later. I kept my feelings bottled. (Tripathi 6)

Laxmi was traumatized by these incidents and started to defend herself. The boys black mailed and raped her when they found her resisting, yet she fought back. Many children with gender incongruity were physically assaulted by their neighbours, classmates and even family members. Later they were threatened to be exposed for their feminine behavior.

Laxmi's love for dancing was deep and divine. While dancing she forgot her troubles and pain. She could express the whole of her femininity through dancing. The way her foot moved and hips swayed to the rhythm of music she felt she was a goddess, liberating every tint of masculinity and captivating the feminine inside her. Her dance teacher Baby Jhonny was more than a guru to her, she was an inspiration. Laxmi took every word of her teacher to heart and expressed it in life. Baby Jhonny insisted her students to maintain the grace and poise of a dancer both on and off stage. She believed that a dancer's movement should always be elegant even while walking on the streets. The words of Baby Jhonny had a profound impact on her. Even after coming out as a hijra in public she draped her saree, walked and talked like her teacher. "Today, everyone compliments me on my attire and on my personality in general. But the credit for it must go to Baby Jhonny" (Tripathi 25). Through her dancing skills Laxmi grew to greater heights. She started a dance school called *Vidya Nritya Niketan* which was later renamed to *Lucky Chap Dance Academy*.

The heteronormative society always tends to find faults with whoever deviates from its ideologies and norms. No matter how talented, brave or well-behaved, they are always branded as an outcast. Laxmi felt betrayed, every time she was identified as a man in the society. She wanted to be a woman and live as a woman. She secretly went to Byculla, a place in Mumbai where hijras lived. She became a chela meaning disciple or daughter to Shabina, another fellow hijra. She was overwhelmed with joy after the initiation ceremony. But she hid this from her family, fearing their wrath. Laxmi was a successful dancer and choreographer but achievements were not acknowledged by the society instead she was discriminated for being a trans person. Dennis Prager in his book *Happiness Is A Serious Problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual* elucidates this kind of human behavior as the 'missing tile syndrome'. It is the human tendency to overlook goodness presented and find fault in what is absent.

One of human nature's most effective ways of sabotaging happiness is to look at a beautiful scene and fixate on whatever is flawed or missing, no matter how small.

This tendency is easily demonstrated. Imagine looking up at a tiled ceiling from which one tile is missing—you will most likely concentrate on that missing tile. In fact, the more beautiful the ceiling, the more you are likely to concentrate on the missing tile and permit it to affect your enjoyment of the rest of the ceiling. (Prager 50)

Trans people in India were often despised for begging and doing sex work. They are considered as a nuisance for disturbing the public with their loud voice and claps. But Laxmi was nothing like that, she was educated and well behaved, yet the society did not accept her as a fellow being. When Laxmi's parents came to know of her hijra identity, they became perplexed and angry. Her mother shouted at her for betraying their family honor and community. She even tried to bribe Laxmi to start a new business if she could live as a man. Laxmi felt empathetic for her parents, for breaking their trust and expectations. She tried to convince them by explaining her achievements and her ability to survive on her own. But her parents were not ready to listen and cursed her for being a hijra. This reflects the deep rooted heteronormative ideologies among people. Laxmi longed for the love and acceptance of her family. She went to school, worked hard and earned a job for the reason that she never wanted to end up like many other trans people who did sex work in her community. She thought that society might respect a trans woman if she is capable of living on her own with dignity. On the contrary she was verbally and physically abused for her sex change. "My father did not speak to me. As for my mother, she cried non-stop for three whole days. Things came to a head when, in a fit of anger, she sheared off some of my hair. I could take it no longer. I drowned my sorrow by starting to work for the hijra community" (Tripathi 49-50).

Prager points out that the missing tile syndrome is universal. One way or the other humans tend to look for the void rather than being satisfied with what they already have. He further states that whatever people proclaim to be the most important trait in others would be the only thing absent in their life. A trans woman is a person, born with male sexual parts but later identifies the femininity in them and change their sex to female. Every trans woman before transition would be blamed for not being manly, for having a feminine body, and behaving like a girl. They point out the missing manliness and taunt them for the uncontrollable feminine nature. At the same time after transition, they are singled out for not having a uterus, naturally formed

breasts, and vagina. Prager calls this human behaviour as 'miserable'. He reprimands the human nature that concentrates on what is missing and opines that unless people teach themselves to concentrate on what is present and be contented with it, they will end up obsessing over the missing tiles creating anxiety, hostility and humiliation for them as well as others.

Laxmi after coming out as a transgender, started working for the upliftment of sexual minorities. Her visit to United Nations for United Nations General Assembly Special Session on G4 visa made her to realize that trans people were meant to achieve great things and not to be confined in begging and sex work. She admired the transgender community in America leading a dignified life when compared to India. She dreamt and worked for the betterment of trans people in India. Like Prager, Laxmi found happiness in the uniqueness of her body, mind and soul. She never bothered to go behind the missing tile in her life. "I felt empowered, and empowerment is not a word that normally exists in the vocabulary of a hijra. It is true that as a person, I, Laxminarayan Tripathi, liked taking on new challenges, but as a hijra I was never allowed to (Tripathi 62-63). The memoir *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* presents Laxminarayan Tripathi as a multi- faceted personality; the child, the dancer, the lover, the woman, the friend, the dutiful son, and the hijra.

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