



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

From *Mahabharata* To Modern Times: Exploring Artistry, Identity And Inner Turmoil In The Writings Of Laxmi Narayana Tripathi

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Abstract:

Art is said to be an object to express peculiar skills, talents or mastery over certain things. Generally, people consider only language as a system for sharing one's thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions. While art is also the most effective way for expression of feelings. It is a sensational experience that one consciously or knowingly creates to express one's imaginations, feelings and thoughts. Art has a wide range and it does not make any difference according to any caste, category, religion, culture or gender. Art is a divine gift of God and certainly it is not given to everyone. It includes a broad range of human creativity resulting from imaginative power of human beings. Art contains a sense of capability, training and mastery. As we all know, that a few common art forms are painting, sculpting, singing, music, dancing and so on. The art forms that this research paper is going to pick up are the arts of dancing, playing music and singing. These art forms are being taken up because these are chiefly found in third gender.

The Present research paper will be dealing with how these art forms are strictly adhered to transgender people in India and the reason why only these art form of dancing and singing have been assigned to them and how these art forms help them improve their mental, physical and spiritual health. This research paper will also be discussing the treatment of transpeople by society straight from the ancient period of *Mahabharata* to modern times. It will also focus on the importance of these art forms in their lives, and how they cover the pains and sufferings of transpeople providing shield to them. This research paper will also put forth the problem of identity crisis which is most commonly found in transgender people and how they deal with it seeking refuge under their talents, skills and arts.

Keywords: *kliba*, eunuch, sexual orientation, *Tritiya prakriti*, transgender, *kinnars*

Introduction:

In ancient Hindu mythologies, transgenders have been given a sacred place. Their names are counted in the category of demi-gods. *Kinnars* are depicted in Hindu mythologies as half-man, half-bird or half-horse including *Buddha* scriptures also. In short, they are half-man and half-woman which usually results in gender identity crisis. They have strong connection with music and art. It seems like as when many of *varnas* were divided into different groups according to their karma, trans people were assigned to be a medium for the purpose of entertainment. They were given job only to entertain people. So, if any of the transpeople, doesn't know singing and dancing, he or she has to learn it first and this tradition of being skilled in dancing and singing is coming straight from our ancient times till now and can easily be seen from our oldest sacred Hindu scripture *Mahabharata* to the modern forms of Indian literature. One such modern Indian novel *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* is being taken over here to show some similarities or I will try to establish some correlation between the character of Brihannala of *Mahabharata* and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, the protagonist of the autobiography *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* written all by herself.

The character of Brihannala, another name and form of *Tritiya prakriti* taken by Arjuna in *Mahabharata*, throws light to some extent on the place and condition of transpeople in ancient Indian times. He was a true warrior but through the curse of the nymph of heaven, Urvashi he became a eunuch or *kliba* just because he

refused the sexual advances of the nymph. By that time, he was learning art skills and being trained in them.

The story begins when the five Pandvas were exiled from their kingdom for the period of twelve years along with another year to be spent unnoticed or hidden. All the Pandava brothers thought to seek refuge in the kingdom of Maharaja Virata. They decided to appear before the king in different disguises. Of all the disguises, the disguise of Arjuna was the strangest one. He took the disguise of a trans and named himself Brihannala though it was a transformation. His appearance before the king is described as,

“Just then a very handsome man was seen wearing jewelry of women along with golden bangles. He was wearing *kundalas* in his ears and he had a conch in his hand. His hair was open. He had broad masculine shoulders and was walking proudly like an elephant.” He introduced himself, “Lord! I am a castrate; my name is Brihannala. I know singing, dancing and playing music very well. I am skilled in these art forms. Hire me as an art teacher for your daughter Uttara.”

(S M,493)

Here, it is admissible that king agreed to give him employment and didn't bother about his gender. It is notable that in ancient India, trans people were accepted without much discrimination. But at the same time, it is also remarkable that it was primarily his skills of dancing and music, that led his mission of hiding unnoticed towards successfulness. So, in this way also we came to learn that art has a prominent place in life of transgender people. Being impressed by his artistry, the king, Virata kept him under his service and instructed him to make his daughter Uttara and her maids proficient in dance. It was still not that easy, he had to undergo many tests and examinations just to make it clear that he was really a eunuch. After getting through several tests, he was finally assigned to be the dance master to the princess *Uttara*. Here, it is notable that in the kingdom of Maharaja Virata, Arjun was accepted as he presented himself before him but one thing is also markable that though he was respected in Virata Rajya but the respect was only due to his excellence in art. Later on, when other issues began to appear, he was humiliated and underrated just for being a eunuch. Many research articles claim that he was always respected in the kingdom of Virata or they try to say that transgender people had respectful position in the ancient society through the reading of *Vedic* texts, but

according to my study, they certainly had a reverential place but it always had been under dominance of patriarchy. As it is not hidden from us, that India has always been a patriarchal country where other genders are always oppressed by male dominance. So, naturally whenever it came about the respect for other genders, the male society has always been kept on the top. The same thing can be seen when Arjuna's bravery was questioned when he went to have a combat with Kauravas being a charioteer of *Uttar*, *Virata's* son. Firstly, when king *Virata* went in a war with *Kank*, who was *Yuddhishtir* in disguise, prince *Uttar* was left alone in the palace and just then a news came about the invasion of Kauravas, into *Matsya Rajya*. Hearing this, *Kumar Uttar* started boasting of his chivalry before the ladies of the palace. *Draupadi*, who was standing over there in form of *Sairandhri*, appeals to prince *Uttar* to take *Brihannala* with him as his charioteer. Immediately, a negative response came from his side for *Brihannala* being a eunuch. He questions how can a eunuch help him in fighting against such a mighty force of Kauravas. He makes him feel inferior and dejected. But ultimately, it was he only who saved him as well as his people and kingdom. Similarly, he was again brutally humiliated by the king himself when he was informed about the victory over Kauravas not by his son but by *Arjuna*. He stated,

“Go quickly and get to know if *Kumar* is alive or not? There is no possibility of one being alive whose chariot is being driven by a eunuch.”

(S M,530)

Though he had a doubt at his son's valour but he was not ready to accept the fact just because *Arjuna* was in the form of a trans. On the other hand, when *Kank* was continuously giving accountability of the victory to *Brihannala*, this made *Virata* so angry that he hit *Kank* very hard by throwing dices on his face for praising *Brihannala*. These incidents clearly show the pathetic condition of eunuchs even in ancient time and it also makes clear that showing courageousness in battlefield or having some sort of manly things were not made for them. Their main purpose was strictly to entertain people through their art forms of singing and dancing.

Arjuna used to keep the women of the seraglio happy and pleased with the help of his art of singing and dancing. He was so helpless due to the curse that he could not even help Draupadi whenever she needed him but his heart was melting to see woes of her wife. When Keechak, the general of the army of king Virata, forcefully wanted to make Draupadi her wife, and insulted and beat her in the assembly of the king she felt insulted and went to mighty Bheem and made a complaint about Arjun saying,

“This young brave Arjun who has alone gained triumph over gods and human beings, is teaching dance nowadays to the women of Virata. Once he had been an epitome of idealness in religion, valour and truthfulness and now my heart is wrenching to see him dressed like a woman.”

(S M,500)

Finally, *Bheem* gets ready to kill Keechak in spite of all the challenges of the revelation of the identity still the agony in the heart of Brihannala is seen when Bheem was killing Keechak, Brihannala was playing instrument very loudly that his hands began to bleed. His heart was filled with anger and anguish just to be reflected in the form of art. Here one can say that he surely took refuge in his art. After that, *Arjuna's* inner turbulence is visible when Draupadi was coming back to the palace after Upkeechaks (brothers of Keechak) were also killed by Bheem. She meets Brihannala on the way back to palace. Brihannala asks her,

“Sairandhri! how have you been rescued and who killed them?” Sairandhri out of grief told her, “What have you to do with me now? You are very busy in teaching dance to the ladies of the harem. Are you making fun of me?” At this, he replies, “Kalyani! Have you any idea about my sorrow or grief which I have to go through after becoming a castrate?”

(S M,505)

Such a statement shows that even gods and *gandharvas* were not able to feel happy in the transformation of a trans so how can a normal human being be happy or contented? Transgender means a blend of masculinity and femininity. Another example of one such blending was seen when Brihannala went to the war, fought

bravely and brought clothes of the enemies for the doll of Uttara. This instance symbolically shows the perfect blend of chivalry of men and kind heartedness of women.

If we come across the story of a modern renowned transgender activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi who is also a Bharatnatyam dancer, actor and writer of her autobiography, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, we come to know that her life as a trans was also not easy. Being born in a Hindu Brahmin family and facing the challenges of identity crisis and guts to accept the happenings first to herself and then to family, was never a cup of tea for her. Her childhood was filled with sickness. She was not a physically healthy child. She was the patient of asthma, typhoid, malaria, pneumonia. In spite of her illness, she had a great interest in dancing and here onwards all the turbulence spread. People generally correlate the art of dancing with women. So, it is indigestible for the society when a boy dances. It does not only deny the talent but also makes the person subject of joke by using different slangs for him like 'bayakya', 'chhakka', 'mamu' etc. She was alone, sick still she had a special love for dance and she was trying to forget her illness under her talent. She has all the traits of an artist from her very childhood and, to some extent, only these art forms whether it be of dancing or acting, gave her relief from the agony of being a transgender in the current society. If we talk about the love and support of family, she was lucky for this, as her parents were very supportive and trusted her since her childhood. She was not an ordinary child. She was the eldest son in her family. She was a responsible and sincere child as well and she understood it very well. The story of denial begins when she started showing interest in dance which is chiefly meant for women according to the society and this triggered her thoughts about her own gender. She began to question her identity. Her sufferings were not limited to the identity crisis only, besides she was also struggling with sexual orientation. She was born as a man but she does not have longings for women. She was attracted towards the same gender. She began to contemplate about her identity as who she was whether she was a boy or a girl. Where this life was leading her? Would she ever be able to do something meaningful in her life? Being confused, she joined gay community but soon found it to be a mismatch for her gender identity. She didn't fit in there and again it resulted into dismay. Not just this, she had to face multiple sexual abuses in her early childhood until she learnt to say 'no'. All this did not happen overnight, she

gradually developed a sense of understanding within herself. Amongst the noise of such complex thoughts, she started seeking shelter in her dance. She opened her own dance school '*Vidya Nritya Niketan*' on the name of her mother when she was just in class 7th. She never compromised with her skills of dancing and acting. She continued with her dance even after knowing that it was only her dance form due to which people started calling her '*chhakka*'. She says in her autobiography,

"Dance worked like oxygen for me...it helped me in forgetting my sickness..."

(M.H.M.L, 39)

When she was not contented with the dance taught in the school, she went to Baby Johny, to her new dance teacher, who also made a long-lasting effect on her personality and gave a new direction to her thoughts and ideas. Apart from teaching dance, she also taught her how to present dance or to present oneself before the society. She suffered through identity crisis until she gets to know that she belonged to transgender community. Here, it seems important to notice that she was not rejected by her family unlike other transpeople. So, it was not necessary for her to join transgender community still she did it for the welfare of other people of the community. Certainly, she has the merit of a leader, an activist, an actor but above all her art of dance is dominating. She began to teach dance in her academy and was learning also. She met other choreographer also like Vaishali Miss who taught her filmy dance and then Mahalingam and Vasant Kumar who trained her in Bharatnatyam dance form. Everything was running smooth under the roof of dance then again, she met with another sexual assault by a group of boys but she strictly denied them. She was doing several reputed stage shows but at the same time was dancing in dance bar also.

To make it clear, one can say that dance, music, acting, singing or any art form is a good medium to forget one's woes and sufferings but it is not a permanent solution as well. The pains, sufferings, troubles of the third gender are still lying hidden from us. There are many reasons of our ignorance for their poor condition. First is, our lack of knowledge and second is, the prejudice or the indifferent approach that society has developed for them. Through this research paper, I have made an attempt to put the condition of the third

gender into periphery of different yet similar art forms. What I found in common was that, *Brihannala; Arjun* of the *Mahabharata* (from ancient times) and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (from modern times), both of them seem to find refuge in art. Art worked like a shield for them to get protected from negative thoughts, agony, dilemma, chaos and inner turbulence. So, here it is worth saying that art has played a prominent role in the lives of transgender people because it helped them live happily forgetting their day-to-day problems. One more similarity apart from the art form, is that it is true that Arjuna was a great matchless warrior but Laxmi Narayan Tripathi also proved herself to be a warrior when she fights for the rights of trans community and made it successful also. Once she said in her interview,

“I am Laxmi. I am myself. When I want to dance, I dance. When I want to sing, I sing. When I want to be an activist at the forefront, marching forward, I am there.”

(Concluding in support of my view from an interview of Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi, taken by Shanoor Seervai published in Guernica magazine whose reference has been given at the end of the paper.)

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